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-Voltaire

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A BUNCH OF HOSTILE STATES OR FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURS?

The tenth summit of the South Asian Association of Regional Coorporation (SAARC) held at Colombo in the third week of July was a high profile occasion, with the heads of states of the region's two big powers, India and Pakistan, taking part. However, with the talks between Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Nawaz Sharif coming a cropper, the summit's profile took a nosedive.

Sharif made it that the outcome of his talks with Vajpayee was "zero". Even the modalities of resumption of talks between officials of the two countries could not be decided! The sound of the nuclear blasts and the distrust they have created are still in the air. Come, August 6 and 9 this year and it was the turn of the Mayors of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki justifiably grimaced at the latest of blasts and made appeals to India and Pakistan to desist from an arms race in the subcontinent.

It was clear from the beginning that the smaller states in the region would not directly raise the Pokhran and Chagai nuclear blasts issues during the Colombo summit. However, Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga and Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina referred to them as "affecting the ambience" and "avoidable". Nepal prime minister G P Koirala made it clear that fear of arms race was pervasive in the region and even Maldives president Gayoom, who usually toes the Indian line, talked of "new concerns", calling for "greater vigilance". With the result that only Vajpayee and Sharif were the two leaders who had nothing to say on the blasts!

The impasse in the Indo-Pak talks can be attributed to several reasons: following the blasts, the Kashmiri militants have stepped up attacks on the Pandits (who are Hindus) in Doda and other places in the Jammu region, selecting and killing at will. They even struck close to Shimla at Himachal Pradesh, killing more than 30 persons. Indian home minister Lal Krishan Advani and defence minister George Fernandes made personal visits to step up vigil on the line of actual control in Kashmir. A number of cross border encounters and battles are now taking place between Indian and Pakistani troops on a daily basis. Apparently, the weekly hotline link between the defence chiefs of the two countries was not resorted to for a while. The threat of a low-intensity war is on. George talks tough as usual, claiming that the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir would one day be liberated. Advani even made an offer to quit his post if the attacks did not stop and the Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Farooq Abdullah had to cut short his London stay to return to the seat of power in Srinagar, the town which even witnessed a strike in protest against the Vajpayee-Sharif talks at Colombo.

While the Indian delegation in Colombo has been insisting on a "wide and comprehensive" basis for talks, Pakistan wants Kashmir to be accorded top priority. Sharif has made it clear that an international mediatory effort would be essential for the resolution of the Kashmir issue, something which he has already harped on during his meeting with US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, who visited both New Delhi and Islamabad last month. Sharif does not seem to have budged from his demand though his country's economy is in ruins, a far worse situation than India's. A financial emergency is on and Pakistan expects at least part of the US 1.2 billion dollars International Monetary Fund aid to come to its rescue by next month.

The talks between the two countries would have to wait till Vajpayee and Sharif meet again under the benign gaze of president Nelson Mandela in South Africa for the NAM summit later this month. It is to be seen whether Johannesburg would be the platform for the breakthrough which had failed to take place at Colombo.

As a multilateral forum, SAARC has had the tradition of avoiding contentious bilateral issues between its member-states. However, as it has happened in Colombo, such issues have a direct bearing on the atmosphere in south Asia. In the last five decades, south Asia has proved that it is as much a hotbed of several types of bleeding conflicts as any other region in the world.

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And any multilateral forum will ultimately have to address this issue.

SAARC has had a tough existence in the last decade and a half. The Indo-Lankan standoffs over the Sri Lankan Tamil issue during the early and middle eighties did affect the SAARC functioning as all issues discussed in the multilateral forum did have a relationship with the Tamils issue which was (and perhaps still is) decisive in determining the ties between the two countries. With main and contentious issues being kept out, SAARC became a formal and titular meeting place where the warring states would put on a show of public solidarity, a farcical display of self-deception. The Indo-Pak nuclear blasts have ripped off this mask and even the combined dramatic efforts of all the players involved could not keep the play going well this time.

Apart from the tensions in the Indo-Pak ties, the twists and turns of ties between India and Bangladesh have been quite apparent. The assumption of office of the Awami League paved the way for the resolution of the Ganga-Padma river water conflict between the two countries manifesting an improvement in relations between the two countries, but tensions seem to be building up following the recent refusal by Bangladesh to hand over Anup Chetia, the chief of United Front for the Liberation of Assam (ULFA), to India. ULFA is ingaged in a violent campaign of secession from India. Chetia was arrested in Dhaka a few months ago for overstaying under forged passports. Though Bangladesh has formally told India long ago that it would not allow its terrority to be used by militant groups operating in the north-eastern Indian states, it has kept Chetia within its fold. The arrested ULFA leader now faces the too-obvious charge of illegal overstay and possesion of foreign currencies.

And as for another member of SAARC, Nepal has witnessed a series of agitations last month against the setting up of an Indian border checkpost within its territory! The relationship between Bhutan and Nepal has long been acerbic because of the savage treatment meted out by the Bhutanese government to people of Nepalese origin living there.

If SAARC wants to become a forum for ensuring peace and development in the south Asian region, these contentious issues will have to find at least an indirect place in its agenda. It is necessary to work out specific timeframes within which border disputes, ethnic conflicts and related security issues in the region are thrashed out so that economic and social issues can be tackled head on. The samaller regional states like Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan and Nepal may wish and agree to such a development, but given the game of brinkmanship indulged in by India and Pakistan over the recent nuclear blasts, the bleeding problem of Kashmir and the high level of distrust between these two states since independence, it would be difficult to state whether these two would ever agree to such an agenda.

At present, despite the much publicised periodic gatherings of the heads of states of its member countries which provide opportunities for group photogrphs which quickly find their way into the front pages of newspapers, SAARC does not give even the appearance of an association of friendly neighbours. In fact it looks more like a bunch of hostile states suspicious and even fearful of each other and whose leaders at least for the duration of their summits engage in the pretence of regional coorporation.

Demand for Full Probe into Mass Grave in Jaffna

The probe by the Human Rights Commission into the reported existence of mass grave at Chemmani in the northern Sri lankan town of Jaffna has resulted in the Commission's decision to call for the excavation of the alleged mass grave for a full investigation.

This comes after Commissioner T.Sunderalingam met a convicted soldier at the Welikada prison recently to obtain more information on the charge. Soldier Somaratne Rajapakse, sentenced to death for the rape and murder of Jaffna schoolgirl Krisanthy Kumaraswamy and others, had claimed during the High Court trial that 400 Tamil civilians were killed and buried in a mass grave at Chemmani in northern Jaffna.

An HRC official said UN assistance would be obtained in excavating the grave and making a scientific study on the remains, while the assistance of the Attorney General would also be sought.

The Human Rights Commission discussed the situation arising from the statement made by the accused in the Krishanthi Kumaraswami case consequent to his being found guilty and the preliminary investigations conducted by the Commission, said a press release issued recently by the Chairman of the Human Rights Commission.

The release further said: "Human Rights Commission reaffirmed the need to investigate this matter further and will collect more information, while at the same time contacting the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva and the ICRC with regard to expertise, funding and logistical support.

The HRC is simultaneously contacting the Attorney General and other relevant authorities in Sri Lanka to ensure that investigations are facilitated and that the integrity of evidence is protected, press release added.

In the meantime it is learnt that the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) has been granted permission by the Attorney General to take the first convict Somaratne Rajapakse to Jaffna to visit the alleged Chemmani mass grave, according to official sources.

The CID which recorded a statement from Rajapakse on July 23, requested permission from the Commissioner General of Prisons and the Attorney General to take the convict to the site. The CID had also recorded statements from another convict in the same case in connection with the allegation made by Rajapakse. Retired High Court judge, T. Sundaralingam, on behalf of the HRC visited the prison and recorded a statement from Rajapakse.

The Human Rights Commission comprising former Supreme Court Judge, O. S. M. Seneviratne (Chairman), Sarvodaya Leader Dr. A. T.

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Ariyaratne, former Chairman of the University Grants Commission Prof. Arjun Aluvihare, retired HC Judge, T. Sundaralingam and attorney Javed Yusuf, on July 13 initiated investigations into the allegations on an independent capacity.

The Human Rights Commission also revealed that it will further expand its services in the peninsula with additional personnel, where presently their team in Jaffna comprises only one investigator.

Meanwhile, it is reported that the members of the Human Rights Commission will leave for Jaffna soon, with a forensic expert. A number of forensic scientists from the University of Colombo are expected to join this team.

Amnesty International in a statement on 3 August urged the Sri Lankan authorities to seek the assistance of international forensic experts with experience of exhumations of bodies be invited to assist local experts in the exhumations, if the existence of dead bodies at Chemmani is confirmed by the preliminary investigations.

Amnesty International requested the Attorney General of Sri Lanka to allow the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRC) to jointly carry out preliminary investigations of the site at Chemmani, Jaffna with the help of leading forensic experts in the country. Chemmani is alleged to be a place where scores of bodies of people who "disappeared" in mid-1996 have been clandestinely buried.

The investigations arose from detailed statements by members of the security forces recently convicted in connection with a rape, abduction and murder of a school girl, two of her relatives and a neighbour. Their bodies had been recovered from this site. It was at the end of their trial that revelations about many more bodies having been disposed of at this place had been made by one of the members of the security forces.

Amnesty International appealed to the Attorney General to ensure that the CID and HRC investigations were properly conducted. The organization also appealed to the Attorney General to ensure that the investigations of the site, including any exhumation, were impartially and independently conducted in such a way that any evidence collected was admissible in court. It suggested the government invite international forensic experts with specific experience of excavating and examining in situ relevant to the specific type of exhumation required at Chemmani.

In a report published last year, Amnesty International said it had found reliable evidence suggesting that bodies of as many as 600 people "disappeared" in the area may have been disposed of in lavatory pits, disused wells and shallow graves.

Amnesty International pointed out that it is the experience of leading forensic experts around the world that the exhumation of bodies piled on top of each other in restricted places, such as lavatory pits and wells, is one of the most complex forms of exhumations to carry out. The organization therefore urges that, if indeed this is confirmed by the preliminary investigations, forensic experts with experience of exhumations of bodies in such conditions be invited to assist local experts in the exhumations.

Amnesty International also appealed to the Attorney General to ensure that, while forensic expertise is sought, all necessary steps are taken to safeguard the area suspected of containing the mass graves, including by ensuring round-the-clock security.

In the meantime, human rights and activists and Tamil political parties have urged the authorities to secure the area in which the alleged mass grave is reported to be situated so that any available evidence would not be tampered with. Fears have been expressed that personnel belonging to the security forces who are in control of the area might sabotage the investigation by tampering with evidence. Vasudeva Nanayakkara, MP belonging to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, has already written to the Deputy Minister of Defence to take up the issue at the Parliamentary Consultative Committee meeting. "This is an issue which should be discussed broadly," said Mr. Nanayakkara.

However, the spokesman for the military denied that the security forces would in any way interfere with the proper conduct of the investigations. "There is fear among the public. This is unfounded, the army is interested in uncovering the truth, said Major General Sarath Munasinghe in an interview with the Uthayan, a Jaffna based Tamil newspaper.

The government will not sweep the alleged Chenmani mass grave issue under the carpet, Justice, Constitutional Affairs, Ethnic Affairs and National Integration Minister and Deputy Finance Minister Prof. G.L. Peiris said.

The Attorney General has discussed arrangements for visiting Chenmani with Prof. Chandrasiri Niriella, a forensic expert from the Ruhunu University, the Government Analyst and the CID.

The government is committed to investigate the incident, the Minister said. Citing the Krishanthi Kumaraswamy case as an example of the government's determination to seek out the truth and bring those responsible for the crime to justice, Prof. Peiris said,"The AG shifted the court proceedings to Colombo since it was felt that the environment in Jaffna was not conducive and safe. It was a trial at bar without a jury. But the previous regime did not even initiate legal action in such cases, let alone the outcome."

The area of the suspected mass grave is now cordoned off and is guarded by police, military spokesman Brigadier Sunil Tennakoon said.

SRI LANKA'S ETHNIC CRISIS AND NATIONAL SECURITY
By Rohan Gunaratna

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THE SINHALA COMMISSION DEMANDS

A Constitution Based on "Buddhist Ideology"

The abrogation of the Indo-Lanka Accord of July 1987, repealing the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, the de-merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, apology and payment of compensation by the British Government for committing genocide against the Kandyan Sinhalese, formation of an Independent Development Authority with sufficient funds and powers to develop the Kandyan areas, setting up of a permanent Sinhala Human Rights Commission to protect the Sinhala people, rejection of the present government's devolution proposals, the reassertion that Sri Lanka has been and will always be a unitary state, not supporting any political party which has an open or secret alliance with the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) of which S Thondaman is the leader, and the enactment of a Constitution based on Buddhist ideology are some the main recommendations contained in the recently released first part of the final report of the Sinhala Commission.

Political analysts regard the recommendations of the Commission as representing an agenda for the continuation of the ongoing ethnic conflict rather than a prescription for peace.

The government should take the findings of the Sinhala Commission report into consideration and act in order to protect the Sinhalese and the Buddhists, said the Ven. Madihe Panghnaseeha Sangha Nayaka of the Amarapura Nikaya.

The Sinhala Commission presented the first part of its final report to the public 28 July. The report by the Sinhala Commission was presented to the Mahanayake Theras of the three Nikayas at the Dalada Maligawa week earlier.

The report states that the Indo-Lanka Accord was signed under duress and accompanied by threats. The recommendations also urge the consideration of ways and means of having a new constitution for the country. The Sinhala Commission, in its recommendations, also called upon the people not to vote for and reject any party in alliance with the CWC, because its leader has called upon the Government to hand over the Northern and Eastern Provinces to the LTTE.

One of the vocal front-men of the Sinhala Commission, Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha Thera, who spoke on behalf of the Jathika Sangha Sabha which appointed the Commission, said that the proposals for devolution of powers by the present government under President Chandrika Kumaratunga provide the perfect framework for the establishment of a separate state of Eelam as demanded by the Tamil Tigers. According to the proposals, a merger of the North and the East is called for, and this gives the Tamils territorial control over one-third of the country to be established as a Tamil homeland. The claim to any land rights in the Northern and Eastern provinces first goes to the people living in the District and next to those living in the region. The division of the country under such an arrangement will ensure that no Sinhalese will ever get an inch of land in one-third of Sri Lanka. The proposals are a recipe for the separation of the country and the creation of a separate state of Eelam, Sobitha Thera said.

Rev. Sobitha added that the leader of the CWC Saumyamurthi Thondaman has been able to manipulate and use the two major political parties in the country. By seeking alliance with him, the leaders of these parties have betrayed the Sinhala Buddhist of this country. Thondaman says that if the Muslims and Tamils are allocated units of their own in the north and east, the plantation workers also have every right to have a unit of their own in the upcountry. Thondaman openly says that the northern and eastern provinces should be handed over to Prabhakaran and to his LTTE. The true intent of the LTTE is known by all the people, he said.

The Sinhala Commission has made the following recommendations:

1 (a) calls upon the government to set up an Independent Development Authority with wide powers to develop the areas comprising the former Kandyan Kingdom and rehabilitate the Sinhala people living there, the most disadvantaged people in the country today.

(b) see that the Temples and Devales in these areas have their lands and appurtenances and amenities restored to them and they be quieted in possession thereof and at special Judicial Officers of the status of a District or High Court Judge, be appointed to inquire into and summarily determine all claims to such lands made by Temples and Devales or individuals. Appeals made against orders made by such Special Judicial Officers to be disposed of within a year of such appeals.

2) see that funds be made available by the Government to the Independent Development Authority without delay, to enable it to carry out the task of development and rehabilitation expeditiously.

3) calls upon the British Government to make amends and apologise to the Sinhala people and pay substantial compensation for:

(a) breaking a solemn International Treaty (Kandyan Convention) entered into by its predecessor with the representatives of the Sinhala people, to, inter alia, protect the Buddha Sasana "Religion of Budhoo".

(b) conducting campaigns of genocide against the Kandyan people, destroying their livelihood and depopulating their villages.

(c) expropriating and grabbing without compensation the ancestral lands of the Kandyan Sinhalese and selling them for nominal prices to foreigners among whom were their own officials.

(d) utilizing the forced labour of the Kandyan people and imposing special taxes on them for the construction of the roads required for the foreign owned plantations.

(e) causing irreparable environmental degradation by large scale clearing of forests in the Kandyan areas.

(f) bringing in and settling an alien people (South Indian labour) in the lands expropriated and seized and

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thereby causing severe political problems for the independent Governments of Sri Lanka.

4) Ensure that funds made available by the British Government are paid directly to the Independent Development Authority.

5) call upon the Government to formally abrogate the Indo-Lanka Accord in view of the secret agreement therein, known only to Tamil political parties and unknown to the majority of the people that the merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces was not to be a temporary one but in fact a permanent one, as the provision made to hold a referendum on the face of the Accord was for the purpose of deceiving the vast majority of the people of this country and not to be acted upon. This makes the Accord void ebb ebb initio and of no effect. Besides the Accord was signed under duress and threats.

6) Call upon the Government to repeal the 13th Amendment to the Constitution and the Provincial Councils Act and to rescind forthwith the temporary merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces all of which were steps taken in order to implement the Indo-Lanka Accord.

7) Call upon the Sinhala people to reject and not vote for or support any party that is in alliance or has a secret or open agreement with any communal party, whose agenda, secret or otherwise, is the creation of a federal or separate state in Sri Lanka.

8) call upon the Sinhala people not to vote for and reject any party that is in alliance with or is secretly or openly supporting the CWC because its leader has called upon the Government to hand over the Northern and Eastern Provinces to the LTTE for ten years as a separate entity and is thereby advocating separatism in this country.

9) Call upon the Sinhala people to shed all differences and unite to safeguard their rights, protect the territorial integrity of our country and ensure a bright and prosperous future for themselves as well as all citizens of Sri Lanka.

10) Call upon the Government not to amend or pass any laws to facilitate or allow persons who failed to get Sri Lankan citizenship under the Srima-Shastri Agreement to obtain such citizenship now.

11) ensure that Article 157A of the Constitution is strictly enforced.

12) reiterate a Sri Lanka is and has always been a Unitary State (in its strict legal sense) and take steps to see that it remains so for all time.

13) declare and affirm that the whole of Sri Lanka is the homeland of all its citizens and that no part of it shall be recognised as the exclusive possession or habitation of any ethnic community or linguistic group.

14) take steps to ensure that there is no division of the country for political or other purposes on the basis of ethnicity.

15) consider ways and means of having a new Constitution for the country. In the challenges facing this country in the 21st Century, it may be necessary to have a new Constitution. But such Constitution must be drawn up after consulting the whole people through their delegates specially appointed for that purpose alone. If we desire to re-establish social peace and harmony together with economic stability once again in this country, we have to design a political structure in consonance with Buddhist social philosophy on which was based the governance of our country until the incursions of the western colonialists. This calls for two basic steps:

(a) namely the restructuring of our political institutions so as to replace the adversarial system introduced by the British which has been the bane of our country, by one where co-operation between the various groups is made the basis for governance in accordance with the principle enunciated by the Buddha in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta. Ananda, so long as the Vajji princes assemble and disperse in harmony and unity, carry out in harmony and unity the affairs of the Vajji country, the furtherance of their welfare and prosperity is to be expected, not their decline;

(b) the adoption of an economic system which will ensure a more equitable distribution of the country's wealth so as to provide at least the basic human needs to every member of our society.

16) see that those Sinhala people who in the recent past have been driven out of the North and East are resettled in their former habitat and restored to their political and civic rights in full.

17) establish a Permanent Sinhala Human Rights Commission to keep a watch and review of all developments affecting the Sinhala people in particular and the nation in general and to take suitable steps in regard to any action tending to adversely affect the Sinhala people and the nation and also to further and advance the cause of the Sinhala people and the nation. Such a Human Rights Commission consisting of three persons may be appointed by the President of the National Joint Committee as persona designata and this could be approved by the National Joint Committee. ●

EROS Leader Released

Veteran EROS leader Shankar Rajee spent a full year inside the central prison at Madras before a local court directed his release on July 24. Shankar had been arrested by Airport Customs officials on the charge of possessing foreign currency worth more than Rs 54 lakh. Shankar had several friends in the Indian intelligence, but no one came forward to help him when he was about to be charged with an offence. His release, in any case, did not signal any respite for Lankan Tamils. Three Lankan Tamils - Thangaraj, Krishnan of Talaimannar and Robinson of Jaffna - were arrested at Pamban shores on July 29 and taken to the Mandapam camp.

Rajiv Case Documents to Delhi

Translated documents of the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case weighing more than two tonnes were sent by train to Delhi, where the Supreme Court would begin hearing on August 24 into the appeal filed by those convicted. The documents had been translated by a 100-strong team of the Madras High court in just over four months. In the meantime, the Amnesty International has denied reports that it was sending lawyers to defend the 26 accused in the case now facing death sentence. It is also reported that Sri Lankan Tamil expatriates living in western countries have collected a staggering sum of Rs.13 million to pay for the defence lawyers appearing in the appeal hearing on behalf of the convicted persons.

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Why is Minister Mangala Being Targetted

Jehan Perera

Although the Parliamentary complex is an impressive edifice, the proceedings within it are sometimes not edifying. The no-confidence motion against Minister Mangala Samaraweera did little credit to the supreme repository of the "people's sovereignty" that die hard nationalists are loath to see change. The manner of the debate was less than politically or intellectually uplifting for the most part. The subject matter of the debate, and that too for a whole day, was an offense to a country locked in desperate crisis. There are so many issues of greater moment to the country than the use of a credit card by a government minister.

Just two examples will suffice. Since August 1995, the government has been struggling to obtain the concurrence of the opposition to change the constitution so that it can better reflect the political and ethnic realities in the country. Although the government has received international praise for its efforts, there has been no corresponding goodwill to it from the opposition. For over 15 months there has been a convulsive military struggle to open the road to Jaffna, so much so that it has been called the "highway of death". These are just two among the host of the pressing problems that the country faces at this time, and which directly affect the well-being of the nation.

Ironically, among all the politicians in parliament, it is Minister Samaraweera who has been in the forefront addressing the most pressing issue in the country. As the Convenor of the government's Sudu Nelum movement he has ensured that a significant amount of grassroots level work has been done by the Sudu Nelum movement to spread the message and ethnic harmony among the masses of people. Within the constraints of the government's "war for peace" strategy, Minister Samaraweera has also given his support to the peace efforts of non-governmental organisations.

The peace caravan in the southern districts, all-island poster campaigns, building of the new Jaffna public library and exchanges between university and high school students, north and south, have been some of Sudu Nelum's own activities. Perhaps war hysteria did not overtake the country, despite the much greater investments in the war, because of the insistent message of the Sudu Nelum movement that there must finally be a political solution to the conflict.

Shameful Debate

Yet Minister Mangala Samaraweera and his credit card that was worth $ 5000 took precedence in the opposition UNP's mind. The Minister and his colleagues, and those who were Ministers before him, have dealt in millions of dollars. But here the expenditures incurred on a credit card of $5000 maximum value, cost the country a day in the life of Parliament.

P P Devaraj of the CWC explained the crux of a responsible approach to the problem in Parliament, but the UNP had gone too far to accept it. "The Minister has explained the expenditure. The Minister's explanation must be accepted," said Mr Devaraj. As anyone who has worked in an organisation knows, no institution can function without a basic trust in its directors, and the same holds true of government.

The line up of speakers at the debate, and their contributions, suggests that the moderate and cosmopolitan mainstream within the UNP seems to have been marginalised. Instead a case of the tail wagging the dog appears to be manifesting itself in the absence of constructive leadership within the party. The debate in parliament was quite shameful, with references to the private lives of people being a key instrument of scoring points against the opponent. How the UNP members could work themselves up into a state of righteous indignation over the $5000 credit card, when they have not been able to satisfactorily resolve even the Wijepala Mendis issue is a mystery.

On the other hand, the reason for taking up the no-confidence motion against Minister Samaraweera is hardly a mystery. In today's parliament there are many members who, in the public mind, are believed to have been involved in multi-million dollar rackets and involvement in murders. They would, obviously enough, make a more relevant target for no-confidence motions. But no one has dared to suggest a no-confidence motion against them.

It seems that Minister Samaraweera was singled out for a motion of no-confidence for a special reason. A motion of no-confidence against an individual is a very personal matter. It can evoke a personalised response. This explains why the impeachment motion against President Premadasa in 1991 failed. Many of those who initially agreed to sign the petition got cold feet. They feared personal retribution of a terrible kind.

But with Minister Samaraweera there was no such fear because there is no viciousness that has been seen in him. In Sri Lankan politics today, which has created its black cats and liberation tigers, non-viciousness is a leadership quality that needs to be appreciated and given pride of place.

Taking Stock

Perhaps more than any other prominent politician in the country, Mangala Samaraweera also represents the non-racist openness of a new generation of Sri Lankans to the emerging world of the 21st century. When thinking of a solution to the ethnic conflict, Sri Lankans should be thinking in terms of the future trends in the world, and not in terms of the Mahavamsa of Sinhala nationalists and cadjan fences of Tamil nationalists.

But while time flows on, too many of us in this country are caught in the past. These are the aspects of the Sinhala Commission report that Minister Samaraweera said will be relegated to the "dustbin of history". Despite the wrath this statement caused among some groups, he spoke the truth.

There is a movement of human consciousness towards global unity,

(continued on next page)

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JAIN COMMISSION REPORT

Arafat's Repeated Warnings of Plot to Kill Rajiv

Vinay Kumar

The Final Report of the Jain Commission of Inquiry has devoted one full volume to the depositions of key Government officials, former Prime Ministers, former Foreign Secretaries but only indicated that the possibility of foreign hand behind LTTE in the assassination cannot be ruled out.

The report has raised several questions, touched various aspects but left them vague and unanswered without coming to any conclusion, giving the impression that it has bitten off more than it can chew.

It has suggested further examination of the possibility of CIA- MOSSAD links with the LTTE, the track record of CIA, Rajiv Gandhi's views on refuelling and on regional security system, his utterances against the policy and programmes pursued by the U.S. contrary to India's national interests and the strong probability of Rajiv Gandhi coming back to power and the emergence of India as Third World leader and leader of Non Aligned Movement.

The final report has also found the information furnished by the PLO Chairman, Mr. Yasser Arafat, as "genuine" and left it to the Government to take action it may think proper. According to the Palestine Ambassador here, the President, Mr. Arafat, was convinced of existence of an international plot to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi and also of the possibility of the threat manifesting itself in South India.

The Palestine Ambassador to India was called to the Ministry of External Affairs for discussions on November 5, 1997. The Ambassador has been in India for nine years and he had warned Rajiv Gandhi of the threat to his life.

"The Ambassador said that Shri Rajiv Gandhi was not specifically told about who could be behind the threat. There was a general discussion of possible sources of danger and in this context, Mossad, the CIA and the LTTE had been mentioned. The Ambassador added that although the information available at that time was based on reports received from within India and from sources in Israel and Europe, the Palestinians did not have any specific information on who would carry out the threat or when and how it would be implemented. The Ambassador also said that he had the impression that Shri Rajiv Gandhi was aware of the threats to his life, as he had then mentioned to the Ambassador that he had received similar information separately." (Volume III, Page 90)

On the difficulties in cracking international conspiracies, the final report said: "The task to find as to where and when and by whom the conspiracy was hatched and how the conspiracy was to be executed is very difficult, almost impossible to unravel, as neither the conspirators nor their aides would come forward. It is only when their actions and activities come to light at a distant point of time and such persons are apprehended, it may be possible that they may unravel the conspiracy."

Relying upon the testimony of Mr. G. S. Bajpai, former Secretary (Security), the Commission said that he appeared to be "truthful and straightforward." Further, Mr. Bajpai revealed that what Mr. Arafat actually told Mr. Chandra Shekhar, the then Prime Minister, was that the CIA, Mossad and the LTTE were behind the plot to kill Rajiv Gandhi. It got further support, strength and corroboration as on June 4, 1991, a cypher message was sent by the Cabinet Secretariat from the headquarters to all its field units for identifying and for tasking all such sources who could possibly get any clues on LTTE and other Sri Lankan Tamil groups and their links with the West Asian terrorist groups, and the units were further tasked to find out if any approaches have been made by the LTTE and other Sri Lankan militant groups to major terrorist outfits. (Vol. III, Page 163).

However, Mr. Justice Jain looks peeved over the deposition of Mr.Chandra Shekhar. "From the manner of his deposition, I am constrained to observe that Shri Chandra Shekhar has withheld some information may be on account of foreign relations as stated by him in a different context." (Vol. III, Page 162)

Coming back to Mr. Arafat's information on the threat to Rajiv Gandhi's life, the report noted that the then Foreign Secretary, Mr. Muchkund Dubey had called the Palestine Ambassador on June 6, 1991 and talked to him in detail regarding Mr. Arafat's warning to Rajiv Gandhi against the plot to assassinate him.

"The Palestine Ambassador had talked to Shri Gandhi towards the end of February in 1991 and again in the middle of April. On each of these two occasions, President Arafat had specific information justifying apprehensions regarding Shri Gandhi's life and

(Continued from page 8)

of which we too must be a part, even as we value our unique cultures, or we will truly end up in the dustbin. This may explain why, at the grassroots level, the Sinhala Commission report attracts little or no attention. The simple fact is that the people know that the report and its conclusions will not solve their problems.

As the country's main opposition party, the UNP needs to use the aftermath of the debate in Parliament take stock of itself and the solutions it is offering the people and the country. It has a large number of parliamentarians of stature and intellect, not least its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. But why is their voice not heard?

Being constructive in a situation of conflict requires commitment and courage and giving a place to be able. Unfortunately, the UNP seems to be taking the easy way out on a number of contentious issues. Its inability to come up with the "third instalment" of its alternative to the government's devolution package and its effort at a no-confidence motion against Minister Samaraweera do not inspire confidence in its ability to sift the wheat from the chaff. ●

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had instructed his Ambassador here to talk to Shri Gandhi. Again, one week before the assassination, President Arafat had called the Palestine Ambassador here and had expressed his anxiety over threat to Shri Gandhi's life after seeing him and Mrs. Sonia Gandhi coming so close to the crowds in election meetings." (Vol. III, Page 12)

The Ambassador claimed that during Mr. Gandhi's Prime Ministership, he used to keep him informed from time to time of all such movements and there was a two-way exchange of information. This came to an end after Mr. Gandhi ceased to be the Prime Minister in 1989.

However, when Mr. Dubey asked the Ambassador if he would assist in following some of the leads given by him, he became evasive. "He said that while he would assure us of all possible assistance, he had at present no concrete information and would let us know as soon as he had any concrete evidence.... He kept on repeating that he and his President knew people who were out to destabilise India and make it weak and vulnerable."

Running through Volume III, Mr. Arafat's apprehension also finds mention in the information given to the Commission by Mrs. Sonia Gandhi. She stated that President Arafat had sent messages to Rajiv Gandhi through the Palestine Mission in India, saying that they had learnt of threats to her husband's life.

In the information furnished to the Commission, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi said: "This was reconfirmed to me and my children personally by President Arafat when he met us soon after my husband's funeral. There were several occasions when he received similar information from other quarters. His immediate reaction on getting these warnings would be to show concern about the safety of his family. He would ask my daughter and me to take certain precautions....he was also worried about the safety of our son, who was studying in the U.S. He would ask me to telephone him and urge him also to be extra careful and alert." (Volume III, Page 63)

The Commission felt that Mrs. Sonia Gandhi has not come out with any specific source or sources of threat divulged to her by her husband or by Mr. Arafat. Also had she been summoned, she would not have thrown more light. ●

SINHALESE AND TAMIL POLITICIANS MEET IN EASTERN SRI LANKA

A new initiative undertaken by the National Peace Council (NPC) and FES was to take local elected Sinhalese Politicians from the Matara District in the extreme south of the country, to the Tamil-majority Batticaloa district in the east. This 3 day visit received a great deal of publicity in the Tamil press. The two largest circulation Tamil newspapers, the Virakesari and the Thinakural carried front page headlines and an editorial on the visit. The Sinhalese politicians met with locally elected Tamil politicians from the Batticaloa district.

The local level Sinhalese politicians who went to Batticaloa belonged to both the ruling People's Alliance and the the main oppostion party, the United National Party. This was in accordance with the NPC policy of conducting its work with politicians on a strictly bipartican basis. They had earlier undergone several awareness building workshops on the ethnic conflict with the NPC and had participated in the 1700 strong National Peace Delegates Convention held in January 1998 which passed a resolution calling for an immediate end to the war and for negotiations between the government and LTTE.

The Sinhalese politicians had a "baptism of fire" in regard to the thinking in Tamil-majority areas which are in the war zone, when a careless remark by one of them at an introductory meeting sparked off an angry response. An appeal from a Sinhalese politician that "We should live in peace" was angrily rebutted by a young Tamil women who retorted with the demand "First let us enjoy our rights, and then we will talk about peace". This led the Sinhalese delegation to the conclusion that their main role was not to talk, but to listen. If they listened, and felt they understood, then only would they make their own observations.

The interaction between the Tamil and Sinhalese politicians proceeded smoothly after this early change of heart among the latter, who were also humbled by the difficulties of life, retarded development and military presence they saw in the eastern area due to the war. The relationship building process also took off due to the skilful facilitation role by the resource persons who accompanied the delegation.

A workshop which was one of the activities in the programme began with a stark reminder of the seperateness of the participants where conversations had to be translated back and forth, between Sinhala and Tamil leading to a comment that "This looks and feels as if delegations from two different countries are meeting". The workshop while also acting as a forum for the sharing of difficulties faced by the local level elected politicians in exercising powers that are supposed to be vested in them by the central government, mainly dealt with ways in which local communities can work towards realising the goal of a negotiated peace.

Frustrations that emerged about "endless talk at the top" led to identifying the need to built understanding and consensus at a community level while reinforcing the need for political leadership. As one Tamil politician summed it up, "The PA and UNP should sit together under the Gandhi statue in Batticaloa, say we are willing to talk this thing through and invite the LTTE to join. If national leaders cannot do this, can local level representatives animate this as a beginning?"

A Sinhalese politician drew strength from his own experience of conflict resolution training by the NPC and said that "We who constitute this delegation - PA and UNP - were like snake and mongoose a few months ago. Today we have travelled to the war zone together and are in dialogue with you. It is a process that can easily be extended to the LTTE as well".

One of the highlights of the visit was a simulated "negotiation" carried out by the two sides with respect to a political solution to the conflict. The

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Tamil politicians presented their view of the powers that should vested in the North-East region which would be Tamil dominated and is claimed as the "Tamil Homeland". After scrutinising the list presented, the Sinhalese politicians objected, and said that according to this list, virtually nothing had been left for the central government. The Tamil politicians accepted this as a legitimate objection, and began to revise their list. The process could not be completed because the workshop had to come to an end, but the point was made, that a combination of sincerity, political will and dialogue can bring about a mutually acceptable compromise.

On the way back to Matara, the Sinhalese politicians discussed the 3 days they had spent in the east. They agreed that what the NPC had put across at the earlier awareness creation workshops had turned out to be the reality. They also felt encouraged that through dialogue a mutual change in positions had been possible. They hoped that what they had shown was possible at the "Micro-level" might also be possible at the "Macro-level" between the government and LTTE.

ANALYSIS

(A member of the NPC reflects on a recent visit to Mannar Island and the Madhu refugee camp in the Mannar District)

Manner town is tranquil at present, unlike last year when LTTE pistol groups operated frequently. The army personnel at checkpoints treat the people courteously. The Mannar road from Medawachchiya has been repaired and the flow of traffic on it is smooth. These are all positive signs that would suggest a consolidation of the government's military progress.

But the unseen reality is the LTTE presence. It is sometimes felt from a distance, as when they blast the electricity wires and transformers that bring hydro electric power from the national grid to Mannar district for the first time ever a few months ago. The little comfort of lighting at night and power for production is denied to the people for so long as it takes to repair the system.

The LTTE is also widely believed to be present in Mannar town, though not in uniform. It is not a presence to be seen by the casual visitor. In some parts of the island there is no regular army presence. In this large forested area, it is said that there is an LTTE presence. Government vehicles are not permitted beyond a certain point, for fear that they will be hijacked and whisked across to the LTTE controlled areas of the mainland.

In the mainland, although the army patrols the Mannar road by the side of the road is thick jungle which would provide the LTTE with cover to launch attacks. A few weeks ago a claymore mine which is exploded by remote control exploded killing a large number of soldiers.

The relative calm in Mannar is attributed to two factors. First is the Jayasikuru offensive that is taking up most of the LTTE's energies. Second is the belief that having Mannar as a "cleared" area, facilitates the flow of goods and supplies which can be smuggled to LTTE controlled areas. How long this calm will last is a question that will depend on the LTTE's strategic design. They can re-ignite the conflict at will, it seems.

And the people? In the "cleared" areas they seem to be trying hard to get on with their regular lives using whatever resources they have and which the government makes available. But the LTTE does not seem to wish a resumption of normalcy for the people in which they have no part.

In the "uncleared" areas the situation is more pathetic. There is little or no economic enterprise and development possible due to the economic embargoes that prevent the flow of fertiliser, kerosene and even chocolates for children, on the grounds that they may fall into the hands of the LTTE. Added to their woes, is the cutback on dry rations to the people in those areas. Refugees from Riveresa 2 and the Sathjaya operation are not eligible for any ration, while those from Riviresa 1 and Jayasikuru are eligible, due to some working of the bureaucratic mind.

At nightfall at around 7:30 pm (old time, as the LTTE has refused to go along with the government's change of time) a solitary lamp dimmed in a shed near the access road to a camp. Three families were spending their last night in the camp. Early the next morning they would set off across the jungles, towards army lines, holding aloft a white flag. They would then "surrender" themselves to the army, and from there would be taken by the army to a refugee camp in a "cleared" area. The reason for their trek through the jungles, and not through the road, is to avoid paying the exit fee exacted by the LTTE.

So it may seem that the government's strategy of bringing more and more territory under its control, while making it more difficult for people to live in the "uncleared" areas, is proving to be successful. But beneath the normalcy in the "cleared" areas, there is a turbulence to be sensed, for everyone knows that where there are Tamils there is also the LTTE. The members of the small Tamil parties know this best. They confine themselves to the town centres, where they tax the people, but dare not go into the villages.

(Courtesy of the NPC News Letter)

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Will the Govt's New Strategy Work?

D B S Jeyaraj

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga was interviewed by K.K..Katyal and V.S. Sambandan of the Indian English daily "The Hindu" on 2 August. She was asked about the stalemate regarding the Constitution reform proposals encompassing the devolution package and its future."How do you see the way out?" she was asked specifically and the President replied:

"There is a stalemate in one way, but we can find solutions to it. We have the solutions in hand. The UNP government brought in a new constitution several years ago and they amended their constitution 16 times - their own constitution - in order to stay in power as long as possible and in the process, it is the strangest constitution in the democratic world. I am not being emotional about it. It specifies that not a word of the constitution can be changed without a two-thirds majority but on the other hand they had brought in a very innovative, to say the least, electoral system where even if a particular party gets all the votes, the way it is counted, it will not have two-thirds majority in Parliament. We want to change the constitution and bring in this political package for the solution of the ethnic problem. We want to do away with the executive presidency and so many other things and they are not giving us that extra 15 or 16 votes which we need to have a two- thirds majority. We have found now found a slightly, may be slightly, strictly not constitutional, but democratic and not illegal procedure. It is a very complicated thing, because you have to circumvent this arrangement they have put. It is a very tedious way of doing it. The political situation has to be good.

The Hindu: You mean the referendum.?

Kumaratunga: I cannot tell you what it is at the moment. We will have to have several elections before we do that. Several types of elections including the referendum and hope that the courts and the judges will not be as partial as they have been up to now. I am confident that before the term of this government is over in the next two years, we will be able to do that .....

Apart from the "Hindu" exclusive, Kumaratunga also obliged correspondents of the Reuters and Press Trust of India too with interviews. In those also she referred cryptically to the "devious" strategy she had in mind to circumvent UNP opposition and usher in the political package. When asked specifically what she had in mind Chandrika Kumaratunga laughed it off by saying "I can't tell you right now. It's a state secret".

UNP's Negative Role

Observers of the Sri Lankan political scene would hardly be surprised at the very visible frustration evinced by Kumaratunga at the non-cooperation of the chief opposition United National Party(UNP). According to the Constitution a two-thirds majority in Parliament and consequent ratification by a nation- wide referendum is necessary for her new proposals to become law. The Peoples Alliance along with allies can muster a little over 135 votes right now. But there is a shortfall of 15 votes from at least 150 votes necessary for a two-thirds majority in a house of 225.

The UNP leadership initially gave the impression that it would co-operate with the government by participating in the All-Party Parliamentary Select Committee which had been discussing proposals for constitutional reform and devolution of power. After a great deal time wasting during the last two-and-a-half years indulging in an exercise of filibustering and procrastination, the UNP has made it quite clear that it would vote against the government's devolution and constitutional reform package.

As a prelude to its announcement of total opposition, the UNP leadership advanced the concept of what its leader described as needs-based asymmetrical devolution for the North-Eastern provinces. When the government, placed in a position of having to depend on UNP votes parliament to get its devolution proposals through, expressed its willingness to discuss and accommodate the UNP proposals and incorporate them into their own, the UNP leadership backtracked. In a remarkable somersault the party that has long ceased to be either "united" or "national" on the ethnic question went back on its previous announcement and came up with counter-proposals which provided for a strong centre with adequate minority participation without addressing the issues of devolution of powers or the extent of the units of devolution.

The UNP which at the behest of India introduced the devolution concept by setting up the Provincial Councils in the late 1980s has now reversed its position stating that sharing power at the centre and not periphery is the answer to the Tamil problem.

The Hurdles

In this context Chandrika Kumaratunga's obvious anger and disappointment over the UNP attitude is understandable. In recent times however she has been exploring various ways and means of overcoming the primary hurdle of the UNP's negative opposition with a view to obtaining the required two-thirds majority in Parliament. If that difficulty is overcome she feels that the secondary hurdle of ratification at a referendum too would be possible. Thereafter the tertiary hurdle of implementation can be tackled boldly even facing military opposition from the LTTE. Kumaratunga and her government with some justification feel that if they can obtain the passage of a reasonable devolution package, the international community's support would be forthcoming in good measure which also would act as an instrument of exerting pressure upon the LTTE.

However with the UNP's opposition, getting a Parliamentary two-thirds majority is the formidable task at present. So much so, Kumaratunga and her top advisers have been pondering over the problem and seem to have arrived at three possible solutions to overcome the current obstacle.

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The first is to dissolve Parliament before expiry of term and go to the polls. The PA will seek a mandate from the people to change the constitution. It will also state that in the event of a victory, Parliament would convert itself into a Constituent Assembly which would adopt a new constitution reflecting the current government's proposals. This type of constitution-making is not unknown to Sri Lanka. A similar exercise was undertaken by the United Front government elected in 1970 under the Sri Lanka Freedom Party(SLFP) leader Mrs. Srimavo Bandaranayaike (the present Prime Minister and mother of President Kumaratunga) when Parliament transformed itself into a Constituent Assembly, exercised the principle of "autochtomy" and enacted the first republican constitution in 1972 with a two-thirds majority that replaced the British imposed Soulbury Constitution. This exercise was repeated by the UNP government elected in 1977 under the leadership of J R Jayawardene to enact the second republican constitution in 1978 which created an executive presidency invested with enormous powers.

The Options

In the current situation, the ruling Peoples Alliance(PA) government if re-elected will go ahead and enact right away the new constitution if it obtains a two thirds majority on its own or can muster one with the aid of its minority party allies. If it does not have a two-thirds majority, then it will convert Parliament into a Constituent Assembly and enact the new constitution with a simple majority. Although the 1972 and 1978 Constitutions were adopted by the Parliaments with two-third majorities, the PA feels that it would not be constitutionally invalid to promulgate a new Constitution with a simple majority if Parliament "becomes" a Constituent Assembly.

The second option is not to dissolve Parliament right now but to go ahead and stage an Island-wide consultative referendum. This would be of a non-binding nature. The people would be asked to endorse the new proposed Constitutional proposals. If the people approve of it with a reasonable majority then that could be projected as the People's verdict even if not officially binding. In that situation the hope is that the UNP though unwilling will be constrained to respect the verdict of the People. So the UNP will have to vote for the new Constitution in Parliament when submitted. The hitch in this line of thought are three-fold. In a situation where the UNP will be opposing can the government win in a referendum of this type which may cut across party lines and arouse communal passions? Will PA parliamentarians pull their weight in this referendum as they would not want to risk their Parliamentary positions? If the people vote negatively on the issue at the referendum then the PA too will be morally bound to abandon the constitution reform efforts ?

Secondly even if the referendum is won by the PA it is important to have a large percentage polled in favour - at least 60%. A lower margin on a controversial issue such as this would be subject to serious doubts whether a credible mandate has been sanctioned or not. Thirdly given the UNP's inconsistencies there is no guarantee that it would play ball and endorse the proposals even if the non-binding consultative referendum is won by the PA. If its conduct in the recent is to go by, the UNP cannot be expected to take a principled position on this. It can always say that it has to respect the wishes of the people who voted against in the referendum and not oblige. Besides another cumbersome detail is that even if the UNP votes in favour, a second "binding" referendum is necessary for ratification. Thus the people may have to face two referenda on the same issue within a short period.

Then there is the third option that may very well be contentious. This idea is for President Kumaratunga to face re-election two years ahead. The President can seek re-election after four years in office even if the full term is not over. Kumaratunga would have completed four years as President in November this year. When Kumaratunga seeks re-election she would campaign strongly on the platform of approval for the political package. More importantly her manifesto would also have an important rider seeking approval to convert the present Parliament into a Constituent Assembly if she is elected. If she wins she will convert Parliament into an assembly that will then pass the new constitution not with two-thirds but a simple majority. If Kumaratunga registers an overwhelming vote then she may even dissolve Parliament. The hope is that the party riding the euphoric wave of her victory will then do very well in following Parliamentary hustings too. In such a scenario the PA will also seek a mandate at the Parliamentary elections to transform Parliament into a Constituent assembly. Thus the government will have then a "double" mandate for converting Parliament into an Constitutional assembly. If in the process a two-thirds majority is obtained it would be most welcome. But even if there is no two-thirds the hope is that it could be passed with a simple majority by Parliament in its capacity as a Constituent assembly.

The Legal Snag

Although Chandrika Kumaratunga and her think-tank have forged a strategy that seems sound on paper there are two problems both of which have been hinted at by Kumaratunga herself in the interview to the "Hindu". The first is the legal aspect. She emphasises that the plan in hand is "not illegal procedure". She goes on to say however that her hope is that "the courts and the judges will not be as partial as they have been up to now". The executive President stating in an interview to an Indian journal that the "judges have been partial" is in itself a statement that is liable to stir up a hornet's nest. Fortunately none of Kumaratunga's detractors have highlighted the issue so far. It is arguable as to whether Kumaratunga was correct or not in her candid comments about the judiciary but her trepidation about how the courts may consider her contemplated constitution-making manoeuvres is certainly understandable. Not so long ago, in her eagerness to get through the devolution proposals which she honestly believed would advance the cause of peace in the violence-torn island, but frustrated by the UNP's opposition, Kumaratunga was threatening to carry out a "Constitutional revolution". This Constitutional revolution was in essence the possible options available to her in this respect and have been referred to earlier. Even as she was talking of the "Constitutional revolution" opposition politicians

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warned that any such manoeuvre would be challenged in courts.

When J R Jayewardene formulated the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution and enacted the provincial councils law in 1987 following the Indo-Sri Lanka agreement, the direction in which the Courts was likely to proceed was a big question mark. In fact one reason trotted out by Jayewardene for the dilution of devolution in the scheme was that it was necessary to prevent an adverse ruling by the courts. When the measure was challenged before a full bench of the island's Supreme Court, it turned out to be a divided bench with five judges proclaiming its constitutionality and four against. It was not without significance that three of the five Judges ruled favourably were from the Tamil, Burgher and Muslim communities. The other two were from the Sinhalese community. All four judges who ruled negatively were from the Sinhala community. One of them after retirement has openly identified himself with the "Sinhala Commission" which has launched a campaign against the government's devolution proposals and called for the repeal of the 13th amendment to Constitution. In this background, Kumaratunga's apprehensions as to the manner in which the judiciary would respond to her government's scenario of constitution-making, if challenged before the island's Supreme Court, are not without foundation.

In this case too any constitutional changes as proposed by Kumaratunga will definitely be challenged in Courts both for political and chauvinistic reasons. It is learnt that even some legal eagles who are quite progressive on the ethnic question have been pessimistic about Kumaratunga's proposed stratagems being okayed by courts. The entrenched clauses of Jayewardene's constitution continue to be a stumbling block as they stipulate very clearly the conditions under which the current constitution can be changed. Unless a very bold, imaginative and widely interpretative approach instead of a rigid one is adopted by the Courts, proposed manoeuvres are very likely to fail. The proposal of seeking a mandate to convert Parliament into a Constituent assembly and then enact the new constitutional reforms especially is a highly controversial one. Even without ascribing hidden motives to the Judges, it is possible that the Courts may be compelled to rule out the proposed moves on grounds of them being "ultra vires" the Constitution.

For the present it is not necessary to pre-judge the outcome of the legal tangle that is to ensue in the future but Kumaratunga has to overcome other obstacles before that.

This brings us to the second problem referred to in her "Hindu" interview. When describing her plans vaguely the Sri Lankan President says "It is a tedious way of doing it. THE POLITICAL SITUATION HAS TO BE GOOD". Now what could Kumaratunga mean when she says the political situation has to be good. It can only mean that the political climate should be conducive for the PA to win well at the hustings. In short she wants to win the polls to push through her package in addition to the natural desire of politicians to consolidate and retain power. All her calculations of gaining a mandate to convert Parliament into a constituent assembly etc can come an obvious cropper if she fails in the initial test of

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winning relevant elections. It is this imperative balanced with present political reality that has impelled Kumaratunga to declare an island-wide emergency and postpone elections to the provincial councils. This action has tarnished her democratic image greatly but from Kumaratunga's perspective it is a "necessary evil" to achieve her overall objective. In that sense her current conduct is more or less a manifestation of the launching of her new strategy to enact a constitutional revolution that ultimately will resolve the ethnic crisis.

Chandrika Kumaratunga was elected on a mandate full of hope and promise. Sadly that promise is yet to be realised while most of her election promises have not been fulfilled. Almost four years have passed now. Positive achievements are not very visible. The promise to abolish the presidency is a non-starter. The cost of living keeps spiralling upwards.Inflation increases in leaps and bounds. The process of privatisation is subject to much criticism. Corruption is rampant and goes on unchecked. Unemployment prevails. The "war for peace" grinds on with neither the war ending nor peace being in sight. Despite all the pious intentions of Kumaratunga and Peiris the devolution package for all practical purposes has not seen the light of day yet. Furthermore with the greater part of the term of office being over the anti-incumbency syndrome is seen to be developing among Sri Lankan voters. Of the ten general elections after independence Sri Lankans have exercise their vote to throw "the rascals out" on eight occasions. Some say that the situation is so bad that some government MP's have not sighted their electorates for quite a long time.

Thus it is clear that the PA is not exactly riding the crest of a popular wave right now. As such its capacity to face hustings at this juncture and win well is highly suspect. Facing the average Sinhala voter at present with the further handicap of the political package may be a greater hassle. This situation therefore rules out for the moment two of the three options possible for Kumaratunga to enact her constitutional revolution. A non binding referendum may go awry. Elections to Parliament also may not yield positive results. The issue may not so much be Sinhala opposition to the devolution package but resentment over other issues such as rising prices, lack of suitable jobs etc. The danger is that people may vote against the government in the referendum or elections to register their protest over basic grievances and not because of communal reasons. The end result however will be a negative vote for devolution. The only option available then is for Kumaratunga to hold an early presidential election.

Kumaratunga remains the greatest asset of the People's alliance. Some would say the solitary asset. Her charisma is tremendous and she is perhaps the single-most popular mass figure in Sri Lankan politics right now. On a one to one political contest she is way ahead of her chief rival Ranil Wickremasinghe. In spite of all the problems it is felt that she still possesses the ability to edge out her rivals in presidential polls. So the government hopes to cash in on her popularity. Even if Kumaratunga can win the Presidency her margin of victory is likely to be low given the current situation. A further impetus to garner votes is needed. Sadly for a government that came to power pledging peace and an end to war the only available device to gain popularity in the Sinhala South is to utilise successes on the battlefield. The only possible glory that the PA can aspire for in the current is indirect glory. It can hope to bask in the reflected glory of the military if and when it performs spectacularly in the war front. Political mileage can be gained to some extent by succeeding militarily or so it seems.

In that respect thè PA government has placed all its bets on the Jaya-sikurui horse. The success of the Wa-nni operation or reopening the land route to the north is what it is hoping for. Thus the lamentable aspect of the PA's political fortunes today is that it has nothing tangible by way of achievement to woo the Sinhala voter except for the dubious victories of war. If and when the northern highway is captured the PA hopes to project it as a great triumph over the LTTE and translate the ensuing euphoria into votes in the south. That's the PA calculation. Unfortunately for the PA the progress and pace of Operation Jayasikurui has been painfully slow and niggardly. Minister Ratwatte's unrealistic deadlines come and go in the face of a determined LTTE resilience that has truly astounded most military analysts. The "delay" in the military sphere is affecting the political time-table of the PA. Also its "chickenheartedness" in facing polls before a military victory is becoming very apparent.

PC Elections Postponed

The Provincial council elections to five provinces in the South were scheduled for 28 August this year. Had Jayasikurui been completed by July then the PA would have gone to provincial polls confidently. But in the current situation the PA chickened out shamelessly. The PA feared that a debacle in the provincial polls could have a negative demonstration effect on forthcoming parliamentary and presidential polls. It could also be interpreted as a negative vote for devolution. Also if and when the bureaucracy smelt that the government had lost clout then a massive rebellion was possible. The PA regime would have been like a Parliamentary lame duck session. So the Provincial polls had to be postponed until after Jayasikurui was concluded successfully. Again the hitch was that the safeguarding clauses built into the Provincial Council law prevented postponement on flimsy grounds. Only the invoking of the Public Security ordinance and declaring emergency could pave the way for postponement and that is what happened.

Since the imposition of emergency was very necessary for the government to postpone elections under it, the PA went ahead and did just that. In the process the PA in general and Kumaratunga in particular lost much prestige.

The excuses proffered by the government for both declaring emergency and postponing elections were an insult to the collective intelligence of the nation and eroded much of Kumaratunga's credibility. The essence of the government position was that the troops were on the point of annihilating the LTTE in the Wanni. Holding elections now meant the redeployment of security personnel from the frontline to the South for election duty. As such troops could not be released as to do so would give the LTTE an opportunity to escape impending doom and obtain a fresh

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lease of life. At the same time the LTTE had strengthened itself in the South and posed a serious security threat to provincial council candidates in the Sinhala areas. So it was essential that elections be conducted only with adequate security personnel on duty. Therefore it would be difficult to both hold elections and release troops from the battlefront. So as a temporary measure emergency is declared in the whole country and elections postponed. A censorship of news has been in force since 5 June.

Contradictory Logic

What tested the credibility of the government's claim was the inherent contradictory logic. If the LTTE was really on the verge of defeat then the rationale for emergency was not valid. But if the LTTE was powerful enough to warrant an island-wide emergency and bring about a postponement of Southern polls then it could certainly not be on the point of annihilation. Thus the war was certainly not at a decisive stage as claimed by Ratwatte.

Moreover the past pattern of Ratwatte's pompous deadlines among which his boast of shaking hands with Prabakharan on Independence day was the most hilarious made any of the minister's pronouncements suspect in terms of credibility. Kumaratunga and the government had to take much flak for the controversial decision from most shades of political opinion. Three of the four LSSP members in the PA were against it and Vasudeva Nanayakkara registered his dissent by walking out of the house at voting time. The TULF and PLOTE also voted against emergency being proclaimed.

With the "liability" of Provincial council elections being out of the way temporarily the PA now eagerly awaits the outcome of the Wanni war. Ratwatte in a move that has not been publicised has assured the President and some cabinet colleagues that Jayasikurui will be over successfully by the end of October. Consolidation of the Jaffna-Kandy highway between Vavuniya and Kilinochchi will be ready by December this year. By that promise elections could be possible early next year. The strategy then is to call for an early Presidential election first. But as the Provincial councils elections were also postponed there is a legal hitch in having presidential polls before Provincial polls. In that case elections for both will have to be announced jointly and held separately if the Presidential poll is to be held first.

Otherwise Provincial elections can be held and then the Presidential stakes. The government will capitalise to the maximum on the success gained on the military front and go in for Presidential elections. If it does extremely well Parliament is likely to be dissolved and fresh elections held. Thereafter Parliament will become a constituent assembly and enact the new constitution.

Kumaratunga's current strategy as mentioned before seems quite plausible theoretically. But there may be quite a few snags. As stated earlier there is the judiciary. Then there is the fact that an electoral victory sought on the basis of a military victory over the Tamil Tigers carries within itself the seeds of chauvinism. A victory that rests on such chauvinist appeal is highly suspect. One of the dangers in this is that after such victory the dominant mood in the South may be that nothing further should be given to the Tamils. Already the Army commander has gone on record that the devolution package will be redundant if the war is won. Some Buddhist prelates too have expressed similar views. The cry in certain quarters that even the flimsy devolution made possible through the 13th amendment should be taken away and the provincial councils scrapped.

Another factor that may upset Kumaratunga's strategy is the pattern of Sinhala voter behaviour. The assumption that the military victory over the LTTE in the Wanni will result in a euphoric wave itself may be proved wrong. The voter may not believe that victory over the Tigers could be that simple given the fate of earlier boasts. Also by now most people in Sri Lanka have a grasp of the nature of the struggle conducted by the LTTE. If positional warfare as prevalent now ends then the LTTE will go on an all out guerrilla campaign that may prove even more deadlier to combat. In that case the Sinhala voter may see through government propaganda and not vote on the lines expected by the PA. Also the voter may be so disgusted with the PA over issues of rice and curry that the war issue may not count much.

The LTTE Factor

Last but not least is the determining factor in Sri Lankan politics, the LTTE. The Tigers are not going to roll over and play dead in order to enable the government to conclude Jayasikurui successfully. The LTTE will continue to resist stoutly and it is anyone's guess whether the security forces will be able to dislodge them from the Wanni in accordance with Ratwatte's deadline. Also if the troops do succeed in capturing the highway then that would mean more troops to consolidate more territory. This again would create ample opportunity for the LTTE to counter attack troop positions and inflict great damage. Vehicle convoys too may be attacked. If this happens then the entire claim of victory by the government would become an empty, hollow boast.

So Kumaratunga as part of her newly launched strategy has declared emergency and postponed elections. The next scene is military victory before the end of the year over the LTTE. Thereafter it is going to be elections where Kumaratunga hopes to ride the crest of a euphoric wave. The important question at present is whether the LTTE will allow her to implement her strategy according to the time tables envisaged or whether the Tigers have a totally different agenda? ●

Question for Ranil

UNP leader Ranil Wickramasinghe stated not so long ago at a conference in Ratnapura that he cannot extend any support to the current Political Package of the government since it has been rejected outright by Sinhala and Tamil people and the whole of Sri Lanka, but UNP has pledged its full support to any proposal that will bring peace while protecting the territorial integrity and the sovereignty in Sri Lanka. If he has such a proposal which would attract the support of the Sinhala and Tamil people and the whole Sri Lanka and at the same time protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the island, then why doesn't the UNP leader produce it ?

When the Sinhala Commission published its interim report some months ago, Ranil said that he had no problem with it. Now that the same Commission has demanded the abrogation of the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987 and the 13th amendment to the Constitution which Ranil and his party promoted, one wonders what his position is !

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CUDGEL THY BRAINS

Vimal Poopalasingam

Ethnic problem in Sri Lanka is fast becoming intractable to the chagrin of many a peace loving Sri Lankan and people of Sri-Lankan extraction. It is not the inherent nature of the problem that makes it insuperable but the strategies adopted and attitudes displayed by the parties to the conflict make it insurmountable. Intransigence, assuming belligerent postures, uttering minatory words, lack of farsightedness and indulging in fallacious arguments, are some of the causes for the present predicament. In order to get a clear picture of the problem and consequently to find an amicable solution, it is absolutely necessary to analyse the said problem objectively.

In this context, perhaps, it would be interesting and educational as well, if we look into the words and deeds of men of consequence, who have handled somewhat similar problems, if not the identical ones.

The following quotations are in relation to the Minto-Morley Reforms in connection with the British reign over India, of which we don't need to know much about, nor absolutely germane it is, to the tenor of this article. In the following letter, Gohale asks his countrymen to show more patience and calls the media to act responsibly, avoiding carping criticism. Mr G K Gohale was the President of Servants of India Society and an Indian leader held in high esteem by the people, who dominated the political scene during the early part of this century.

Extract from a letter to Mr Dravid from London dated 3 August 1906

"I had my last interview with Mr Morley the day before yesterday and it was satisfactory to the highest degree. Mr Morley spoke without reserve and spoke with much feeling, and he indicated to me what he proposes to do during the next few months. I can tell you that we never had so true a friend of out aspirations in a responsible position since Lord Ripon's day; and those who can realise the tremendous difficulties against which he has been struggling in his endeavour to advance our cause will understand me when I say that we are only playing into the hands of our opponents in impugning his sincerity or doubting his desire to help us. Every fresh day that he spends at India Office our cause gains and the official side loses and if only our countrymen will have a little more patience for say, six months more, they will have no cause to regret their confidence in the present Secretary of Sate. And now I want you to do what you can to prevent any ungenerous criticism of Mr Morley in the press. See Mr Kelkar and with him see Mr Tilak if necessary and beg them in my name to exert their influence for the sake of our common country to discourage any declaration on the part of the Indian press just at present of want of faith in Mr Morley. By all means, let us criticise what he says or does freely, but let us assume for a little while longer that he is a real friend, not one who merely makes professions of sympathy and that where he fails to give satisfaction it is due partly to his ignorance and partly to the extraordinary difficulties which surround him on all sides. Remember that he can act only through the officials on the spot and he is bound to give them a full hearing, even when he is satisfied that they have not acted rightly and further that in mattes in which he has a doubt, he cannot set aside the view of men responsible for the administration lightly. I mention all this to show the great need there exists for more patience and more indulgence on our part. He is the one friend fighting night and day in our interests (and I know this to be no more than the truth) against overwhelming odds, which are rendered all the more overwhelming by his comparative ignorance of Indian questions, and let us not leave the true enemies alone and direct our arrows at him. I am sorry I am not at liberty to say more, but you must beg our friends to trust my judgment a little in this matter, and exercise their influence in the directions indicated above."

In 1908, Gohale ably summed up the Reforms Proposals and their general tenor at the Congress meeting in Madras. The part of the speech that contains the general wisdom to be followed is given below.

"Hitherto, we have been engaged in agitation from outside, from now we shall be engaged in what might be called responsible association with the administration. It is still not control over administration, but it is association and responsible association in administration. There is plenty of scope for growth here, and as we grow and discharge the responsibilities that devolve on us properly. I am sure there will be progress further and further towards our having what may be called responsible administration. From agitation to responsible association and from responsible association a long and weary step but the step will have to come - to responsible administration. (Cheers). Now these large and generous concessions which have been made by the government and the secretary of state must receive at our hands that response which they require. They impose upon us two responsibilities in particular: the first is the spirit of cooperation with the government must now be evoked amongst us instead of mere criticism of Government. The scheme will fail of its purpose and will prove absolutely useless in practice if our attitude is one of constant antagonism. Therefore, the first responsibility that rests upon us is that the scheme should evoke in us a spirit of co-operation with Government. The second is that the new powers should be exercised with moderation and with restraint and they should be solely used for the promotion of interests of the masses of the people (Hear, hear). There are so many questions awaiting solution, but under the existing system somehow the officials do not find sufficient time for their proper consideration. There is the question of mass education, there is the question of sanitation, there is the question of indebtedness of the peasantry, there is the question of technical education and so forth. I do not deny a good deal is being done. I say much more can be done when the Government has the co-operation of the councils. I am sure much more will be done in the future in these directions than in the past. Therefore, these new

(Continued on page 20)

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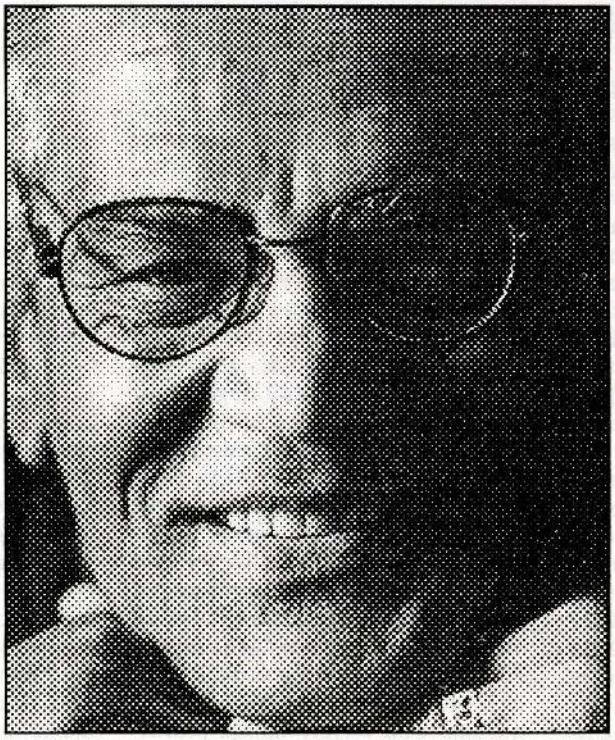

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The entire construction is based on the barrier-free concept which enables a person to move freely to any location within the resort without accessing any staircases or steps. Residents can enjoy a magnificent view of the Indian Ocean and Colombo's skyline from the resort.

The resort is based on a vision of Deshamanya Lalith Kotelawala, Chairman of Ceylinco Consolidated, who plans to have a series of resorts in various locations near lagoons, lake fronts and places of scenic beauty in the hill country, to cater to the needs of the increasing population of retired people.

Promoted by Ceylinco Consolidated through a subsidiary, Serene Resorts Limited, the project pioneers a new concept in retirement that blends independence of the individuals with comprehensive care and services, a spokesman for the company said.

Professionally-designed to cater to active people at or nearing retirement, LA SERENA's Chalet style furnished Residential Units are built around a central facility that includes a swimming pool, spa, entertainment hall, recreation centre, library and video room, restaurant, business centre, medical centre, a grocery, laundry and a guest house for visitors, all of which will be maintained full time by the company for residents and their guests.

Each unit, single or double bed-roomed with living room, dining room, pantry and attached bathroom is supplied with telephone facilities, hot and cold water, uninterrupted electricity, and the option of air conditioning.

'LA SERENA is based on an international concept', says a company spokesman. 'It was prompted by evidence that our population is ageing rapidly'. According to projections, 22 percent of the population, over four million Sri Lankans, will be over 60 years old by 2030.

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powers must be exercised in the interests of the masses of the people. If this is done I really have no fear about the future. Gentlemen let us not talk so much of that veto which the Government have reserved to themselves as some of my friends have been doing. To attack the veto of the Sovereign. They are a self-governing people and yet they bear all the inconveniences of this double veto. Let us grow to the full bounds of the new opportunities and it will be time enough to talk of circumscribing the veto that is vested in the Government."

In his peroration which is full of wise counsels, Gohale ably highlights the approach, the practical approach, worthy of being taken note of by our leaders.

"One word more and I have done. We are most of us in India, Hindus, Mohammedans and Parsees, a somewhat dreamy race. Of course, the Hindus are most so. I do not deny that dreams occasionally are a source of pleasure, even if they effect nothing else. Moreover, I admit the importance of dreams in shaping our aspirations for the future, but in practical matters we have to be practical men and have to remember two things. Life is not writing on clean slate. We have to take the words existing on the slate and add other words so as to make complete sentences and produce harmonious meaning. Secondly, whatever you may ask for, that is not the same thing as what you will get or will be qualified to get or in practice maintain if you get. Let us therefore not go in pursuit of more idle dreams and neglect the opportunities, which the present offers to us. On the manner in which we, especially the younger section of our countrymen, grow to the height of the new opportunities will depend the future of the country. None of us wants to be satisfied with the things as they are. But first we must prove that we can bear these responsibilities before we can ask for any more. I have often said, and repeat here again, that I do not want any limits, any restrictions on the growth that should be open to our people. I want the people of our country, men and women, to be able to rise to the full height of their stature as men and women of other countries do. But our growth can only be through the discharge of responsibilities. Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you heartily for the manner in which you have listened to me and for the way in which you have received me."

Life and Times of Sir Pheruzesha Mehta - Rt Hon V S S Sastri)

The above suggestions and time of thinking enunciated by the speaker should not be considered valid only in a specific situation or applicable to a particular scenario, but hold water in most of the general situations.

Even though, the responsibility of finding a lasting solution to the ethnic strife rests with the leaders on both sides, it behoves on the educated section of the society to act responsibly in shaping the thinking of both the communities and creating a conductive environment for a suitable solution to be worked out. Even if we cannot contribute in our small way to create such an environment, let us, at least, refrain from impairing it by our imprudent words and deeds. Let us fervently hope the leaders will not allow the grass to grow under their feet.

TAMIL CONSCIENCE AT STAKE?

Ramesh Gopalakrishnan

Tamil cities and towns have the fate of burning and drowning: Madurai was burnt in ancient times. The Jaffna Public Library, like that of Alexandria, was burnt in our days. Puhar, in an earlier era, and Dhanushkodi now were drowned. For Tamil language, the wrath of fire and sea produced epics of the quality of Silappadhikaram and Manimekalai. In our times, Pudumaipithan wrote of Puhar in his story Sirpiyan Narakam where he traces the origin of Nataraja's cosmic dance. And Dhanushkodi has been immortalized by the contemporary writer Konangi in his short story Al-Beruni Partha Seval Penn.

And Dhanushkodi from where Kamban launches his protagonist Rama to Lanka, is at the receiving end. From time to time, the submerged city witnesses death and sends back the survivors to Rameswaram, where Rama had prayed to Siva before setting off in his journey. The latest of deaths came slowly when the fibreglass boat carrying 52 Tamil-speaking persons setting sail from Iluppaikkadawu in northern Sri Lanka across the narrow Palk Straits sank on the night of July 25. Only nine persons had managed to survive, four of them swimming, aiming for the tower light of the Ramanathaswamy temple. The rest went down, to the depths of the submerged town, Dhanushkodi.

Those travelling in the boat included 50 refugees including 30 men, 15 women and five children, including two-year-old babies. There are two versions of the tragedy. One is that the boat developed a crack at the bottom, letting in water. The other version is that a high tide got water into the boat. In any case, the refugees could not get the water out and the boat sank quietly off Arichamunai.

The four who swamy to safety were all youths in their 20s. Four others managed to float and keep shouting till they drew the attention of local fishing crafts. They were Velayudhan, who had lost a leg due to airshelling in 1984, Kandeepan and Vasanthan, both teenaged boys and Pushparaj, a youth. Velayudhan had lost his wife Dayanithi, three-year-old daughter Bhanumalar and 15-year-old nephew Vinoo. Vinoo's body had surfaced near Katchativu and the Indian naval personnel had located it. Another person surfaced, alive, after a three-day-long ordeal in the sea. The refugee, Babu, reached the shores of Pudukkottai district, having lost his family. Death had already struck the next find: the body of a 55-year-old male refugee at Vannichipatnam in Pudukkottai district.

The stretch of the Palk Straits between Talaimannar and Rameswaram is known to be not very deep, containing 18 sandbars or theedais in Tamil. Militants and refugees always choose to cross the sea at this point, as did the legendary Rama hundreds of years ago. The theedais make up the Adam's bridge which is lovingly de-

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scribed by Kamban even as Vanara-architect Neelan builds it. And the gaps are ideal for the passage of small fibreglass boats, making it difficult for the bigger ships to detect them.

The mishap first evoked disbelief, rather than shock, among the people of Tamil Nadu. Yes, they were shocked by the readiness with which their Lankan counterparts were willing to go to any extent to cross the sea; and to come to an unwelcome land. Yet, the refugees keep crossing. The very next day after the tragedy, 12 refugees arrived by a boat at Rameswaram. The latest one arrived with 23 refugees on board at Rameswaram on August 9.

The mock exercise now began, with Marumalarchi DMK general secretary V Gopalsamy, or Vaiko as he likes to be called, demanding that Prime Minister A B Vajpayee raise this issue at the SAARC summit at Colombo. No minister answered his demand, though the MDMK is a key supporting party of the government. Vaiko's condolences in Parliament were shared by AIADMK and DMK members and there rests the protest story. PMK founder-leader Dr S Ramadoss confined himself to a meek protest, as did many others. Perhaps this meekness would have been able to satisfy their little-tumbling-over consciences.

The month of July, as ever, spells disaster for Tamils, cutting across the sea divide. Three of the four fishermen who had set sail from Rameswaram on July 18 were detained by Lankan naval personnel after their boat sank. The other fishermen seemed to have got drowned. And, the ICRC officials had met the three fishermen at the Jaffna prison on July 25. They are yet to be released. The Lankan navy still resorts to firing at local fishing boats, the latest incident taking place off Nagapattinam coast on August 2, injuring two persons.

Even as the SAARC preparations were on in the second week of July, Lankan naval personnel seized two Indian trawler boats off Mannar and nabbed four Indian fishermen. They were found carrying 1,200 litres of petrol, 120 litres of diesel and 80 litres of lead acid for batteries. Within a week, Colombo announced that three LTTE craft were reaching India after a confrontation with the Lankan naval boats. Later, a naval diving team found the wreckage of one boat and two dead bodies south off Katchativu. Another bullet-ridden empty LTTE boat was found off Devil's Point near Mandapam.

As expected, Vajpayee failed to raise these issues at Colombo, coolly rebuffing Gopalasamy. Mr Gopalasamy had stated that aerial bombardment and outbreak of cholera were two reaons why the refugees were preferring to take risks and cross the sea. His contention has been corroborated by one of the survivors Pushparaj who had described the horrifying state of Mannar district. The attacks on Tamils should stop and the Prime Minister should ensure this, said Gopalasamy. No one from the cabinet said anything.

Gopalasamy was shocked. His real shock was yet to come: Vajpayee failed to address, at Colombo, even the issue of Lankan naval firing on fishermen from Rameswaramand Nagapattinam! ●

Sonia's Stride Towards Agitational Politics

T.N.Gopalan

Congress is the only instrument of progress and development, and only a Cong-I government could protect the interests of the poor and provide social justice. But it is not hankering after power. "We are ready to play our role in the opposition - those who have got an opportunity to run the country must do so. Our duty is to safeguard the interests of the poor. We will not tolerate a situation in which the rich are allowed tax reliefs while the poor are taxed with inflation."

Thus spake Mrs.Sonia Gandhi, widow of the late lamented Rajiv Gandhi, when she addressed her party volunteers at New Delhi on July 28 as she kicked off a rally to protest the rising prices. More important she joined them for a three kilometre long walk through the streets of the capital.

Effused a correspondent on the march, "Stride for stride, Sonia outmatched everybody except the most hard-boiled of her security personnel. Turning from Bhagwan Das road on to Tilak Marg, round India Gate before hitting Rajpath and reaching Rashtrapathi Bhavan (the official residence of the President of India). At the end of it, she was drenched in sweat, mumbling, 'I'm fine at the moment' with many of her colleagues barely able to talk..."

Sonia's Dandy March (recalling Mahatma Gandhi's famous march to Dandi to protest the salt tax), some jibed, but most agreed that it marked her debut in agitational politics.

Mostly non-communicative, sometimes fumbling, even bumbling, generally tentative, without a firm grasp of the murderous world of Indian politics, reluctantly choosing to don the role of the president to prevent the total collapse of the party with which the family she had married into had been associated for generation, but unable to decide which way to go in order to restore it to power, surrounding herself with a self-serving clique, some of whom are utterly discredited and yet others have no mass base worth mentioning, and yet seeking to reach out to the people and rejuvenate the Congress, she has not proved very exciting as a leader.

Many remained anxious. Those inside the party were worried about their future prospects. And those outside, like the left parties, who are still hoping against hope, that a revitalised Congress could succeed in toppling the BJP-coalition and worsting the alliance in the next polls, were equally disappointed. And the July march seems to have created some fresh hopes in their minds.

Like her wily mother-in-law Indira Gandhi, she too is prepared to reach out to the people, sweat it out, literally, and prepare it for the forthcoming polls - Assembly elections in quite a few states including in New Delhi are slated for November next. They will be the first litmus test for Sonia's charisma.

Sonia's campaign in the 1996 polls could not prevent the Congress's debacle. It lost in as many as 86 of the

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137 constituencies wherein she had addressed public meetings. There is another interesting break-up - she had campaigned in 56 constituencies held by the Congress in the 11th Lok Sabha and still it lost more than half of them; and she had visited as many 81 constituencies held by other parties and the Congress could wrest only 25 of them. Nothing much to write home about. Still the fact remains but for her campaigning the party perhaps would have fared much worse. She had at least arrested the exodus of panicky congressmen and at last the dispirited cadres had something to cheer about. Such was the assessment then.

Four months down the line, such consolations are not enough to satisfy the Congress workers. She has to be seen delivering the goods. Her marked reluctance to try and mobilise like-minded parties and topple the shaky BJP-coalition has been very irritating to them as also to the left-of-centre non-communal parties.

If even that was to be explained away as a strategic retreat, letting the coalition discredit itself as much as it could through its numerous omissions and commissions and finally collapse under the weight of its own inner contradictions, the more secular and liberal observers were appalled by the way she was - and she perhaps still is - going about humiliating regional leaders like Sharad Pawar from Maharashtra and promoting her own chosen men with little grassroots support, no doubt a la Mrs.Indira Gandhi.

But Mrs.Gandhi could get away with it all thanks to a fortuitous blend of personal and family charisma, some native wisdom and craftiness and the indescribable weaknesses of an appallingly fragmented opposition. The situation has changed a lot since then.

The Congress's own geographical base has shrunk alarmingly. It has been all but wiped out in the key state of Uttar Pradesh, teetering on the brink in Bihar and Punjab and steadily declined in many other states. Apart from Maharashtra and some extent in Rajasthan, Karnataka, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh everywhere else the organisation is in a shambles. But her tactics in states like Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu are illustrative of her naivete and short-sightedness which could boomerang on her sooner than later.

Maharashtra is one state where the party is definitely on the comeback trail. The people seem to be fed up with the BJP-Shivsena government there. In the last Lok Sabha elections the Congress scored a stunning victory there, bagging as many as 38 out of the 42 seats at stake there thanks to a tie-up Pawar, the unquestioned Congress leader of the region, managed to forge with parties representing the backward castes and the Dalits. But all that Pawar is getting by way of a reward from his president is slights and rebukes at every turn.

Sonia won't make Pawar the leader of the parliamentary party, which could perhaps position him as a prime ministerial candidate if and when the BJP coalition falls. He is only the leader of the Lok Sabha group. And when her favourite candidate for the upper house of the Indian parliament, the Rajya Sabha, was defeated - the Assembly members make up the electoral college - the Pawar loyalists were targeted and the state president, one of them was promptly replaced, and he himself was brusquely summoned to the capital to explain to the High Command what went wrong. And rumours that he could cross over to the BJP in sheer frustration refuse to die despite repeated denials by the Pawar group.

In Tamil Nadu where the only hope for the party perhaps is G.Karuppiah Moopanar, who still seems to retain most of the Congress following, she has made Tindivanam K.Ramamurthy, a Moopanar-protege- turned-baiter president of the state unit. Now this latter has little support and can do nothing to revive the fortunes of the party. All that he can do is constantly foul-mouth his erstwhile mentor and make friendly noises towards Jayalalitha with the fond hope of jumping into her bandwagon sometime or other. Moopanar is so cheesed off that he seems to have given up the idea of returning to the Congress for good and seems content to troop behind the DMK for whatever it is worth.

"There are few signs that Sonia understands the intricacies of politics, especially, practical, grassroots politics, or knows her party particularly well, well enough to be its strategist," noted acidly a commentator when she became the Congress president. He particularly doubted whether she would be able to appreciate the "forward march of the backward castes" in the Hindi belt.

In the event it was on an issue of the OBCs (the other backward castes) that Sonia had to meet with her first setback as the Congress president. The BJP government, eager to shed its obscurantist image, introduced a bill providing for the reservation of 33 per cent of the seats in the Lok Sabha for women.

The UF government under Inder Kumar Gujral too had tried to introduce one such, but failed following strong opposition from the OBC members. These characters were contending that the reservation would only enable the upper caste, educated women to muscle their way in and thus further strengthen the hold of the ruling elite on the polity, a reasoning partly true, but retrogressive nevertheless in that even a tentative effort to empower the women was being nipped in the bud.

The OBC leaders were demanding that their castes be granted some reservation within the 33 per cent quota. But then the point is there is no reservation for the OBCs in the Lok Sabha at all - only the Dalits, the untouchables, have been guaranteed that privilege constitutionally.

When the BJP sought to reintroduce the bill, again the objections came, much more virulently. And this time the OBC leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Laloo Prasad Yadav upped the ante further demanding provision for reservation for Muslim women too, a demand which predictably riled the communal BJP no end.

There was bedlam in the parliament, all business was stalled and furious allegations were flying thick and fast. For her part Sonia first endorsed the idea of passing the women's reservation bill without any amendment to provide for the OBCs or the minorities, especially so since it was Rajiv Gandhi who had originally committed himself to women's reservation in elections at all levels. But the MPs, the OBCs among them, seemed to have rebelled. Already the Congress had become alienated from the backward castes and the minorities, while the forward castes had drifted away towards the BJP. They were scared that to be seen as op-

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posing the demand for reservation for the OBC women could further damage their prospects. Following a closed door meeting the party decided to work for a consensus - a clear admission that it would not strive to get the bill passed as expeditiously as possible. Without the support of the Congress the fate of the bill was sealed and the BJP had to reluctantly shelve it.

Now Sonia's backtracking, while indicative of her failure to grasp the interplay of an array of forces, could also be said to demonstrate her readiness to accept her limitations and play ball according to the rules of democracy, however flawed they might be. And that is some progress and so the faux pas over the bill could be said to have been her baptism of fire.

The dynastic charisma being no more that awe-inspiring, in fact declining rapidly in some parts of the country at least, Sonia has a tough task ahead of her. A coterie of sycophants or committees of technocrats or experts cannot restore credibility to a party which has fallen on terribly bad days and which is held responsible for the multifarious ills afflicting the nation.

When Sonia kicked off the 1998 poll campaign at Sriperumbudur she had observed that though her loss was quite deep and personal and she would have preferred to withdraw into herself, she had changed her mind seeing the India of her Rajiv's dreams increasingly threatened by cynical vested interests and divisive forces. Clearly seeking to dispel the notion that since she was a foreigner she could not voice the aspirations of the people, she said that when she entered Mrs.Gandhi's household three decades ago, she had become part and parcel of india, had come to know it through her mother-in-law's heart, and since her husband's supreme sacrifice her own devotion to India was unswerving and absolute.

"On this hallowed spot", (where her husband had attained his martyrdom, as she put it), "I pledge to work with the Congress with your support and serve the nation with hopes renewed and courage of conviction. Every vote of yours for the Congress would be a vote for Rajiv, a vote for a strong and prosperous nation he had dreamt of," she declared amidst thunderous ovations then.

As it turned out there were not many takers. But the situation could still change in her favour, given the endless capers of the BJP and its pathetic inability to provide even a semblance of decent governance.

The Delhi march did seem to show that despite all her inadequacies, she still could play a useful role in checking the further growth of the communal and fascist forces. She has a long way to go still, pitfalls are many and no one knows whether she would not end up as yet a more negative version of her mother-in-law who too flattered only to deceive. But perhaps a beginning has been made. At least such is the fond hope of the increasingly weakening secular sections in India. ●

Jain's Final Report

An Astonishing Disappointment

T N Gopalan

More than seven years after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at Sriperumbudur in Tamil Nadu, Mr.Justice Milap Chand Jain's final report on the conspiracy angle is at last out, with none the wiser for it.

The 17-volume interim report at least painted the DMK, even the Tamils at large, in gory colours, leading to the untimely demise of the United Front government, but the-volume final report, emanating from an apparently sobered and even intimidated Jain is evoking only all round titters it is squeamish, much more tentative than in its previous exercise, and almost apologetic about its failure even to say which way the needle of suspicion could point to.

The terms of reference of the Jain Commission were to unravel "the sequence of events leading to, and all the facts and circumstances relating to, the assassination of Shri Rajiv Gandhi at Sriperumbudur and (b) whether any person or persons or agencies were responsible for conceiving, preparing and planning the assassination and whether there was any conspiracy in this behalf and, if so, all its ramifications."

In regard to the more important second limb of the terms of reference, the Commission's findings are truly pathetic and an astonishing disappointment

"In such like international conspiracies, the task to find as to where and when and by whom the conspiracy was hatched and how the conspiracy was to be executed is very difficult, almost impossible to unravel, as neither the conspirators nor their aides would come forward. It is only when their actions and activities come to light at a distant point of time and such persons are apprehended, it may be possible that they may unravel the conspiracy. The conspiracy behind the assassination could have been unravelled if Sivarasan, Subha, Shanmugham, Intelligence Chief Pottu Aman and LTTE supremo V.Prabhakaran had been apprehended!"

Why should it have laboured for so many years, causing enormous drain on the exchequer, only to come out with such a slipshod work which would be laughed out of court in any sane discussion?

If the DMK and the Tamils in general were the Commission's favourite whipping boys in its interim report, its canvas has been expanded in the final report to include the likes of Godman Chandrasamy and a fellow wheeler-dealer Subramanian Swamy, though this time round Jain does not throw caution to winds and is very circumspect in his remarks on his quarries.

Witness this on the godman - "Taking the entire evidence, material and circumstances.....a doubt does arise regarding Shri Chandraswami's complicity and involvement....requires further probe..." A far cry from the tenor of the interim report which could blithely bandy about an intelligence report on Natesan, an LTTE operative, in the following words - "Chief Minister told Natesan that killing of Padmanabha was a necessity and so also of Shri Varadaraja Perumal and that Natesan should ensure that he was taken into confidence before

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such acts are committed."

Even Dr.Swamy is only labelled an "unreliable witness" who stubbornly refused to answer many a question from Jain and who thus thwarted the Commission from finding out the truth.

Raising suspicion are some wireless intercepts from Israel meant for Chandrasamy or the other Swamy and a visit to London in 1995 when he could have met the men behind the assassination to cover up the tracks perhaps.

As for Karunanidhi, well, if Jain had come to an "irresistible conclusion" that he and his government had given tacit support to the LTTE which had remorselessly led to the assassination, in his swan song Jain only laments that the ageing Tamil Nadu Chief Minister has not been interrogated.

There are more concrete exonerations too. Earlier on Jain had asked former PM V.P.Singh, almost quaking with righteous indignation, "Search your own soul whether the inadequate alternative security scheme had not resulted in the unintended consequence of the assassination." The Chandrashekhar government too came in for a similar indictment. He now comes round to dismissing the accusations made by the once fire-spewing Cong-I gadfly K.K.Tewari against the V.P.Singh, Shekhar and even Narasimha Rao as so much hogwash. "All the three occupied the high office of the PM and by no stretch of imagination it can be said that any one of them entertained such intention to be in any way connected with the conspiracy to assassinate Shri Rajiv Gandhi."

It does also believe that its suspicion - aired in its interim report - that a foreign hand behind the LTTE could not be ruled out has been further strengthened. Like the possibility of a nexus between the LTTE and the Khalistani groups, but of course there is "no definite clinching evidence".

The way it finally throws up its hands in despair is pathetic, if not ludicrous, though it also seeks to put up a brave front: "I have examined the strength and weaknesses of the theories and leads which have come before the Commission some of which have been rejected and in some material may be insufficient to reach a positive finding, but the evidence and circumstances on some theories examined by the Commission do point some accusing finger on some agencies, organisations, outfits or individuals. The government may adopt such course of action as it may think fit in respect thereto."

And what does the BJP -led coalition do with such a confused mishmash? Predictably use it to fix its opponents and humour the most truculent ally Jayalalitha. While tabling the final report, Home Minister Lal Kishen Advani also announced the setting up of a Multi-Disciplinary Monitoring Agency

(MDMA) in the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to "monitor the movements of all the accused in the assassination case still absconding and bring them to trial" besides looking deeper into the allegations against Chandraswami and his now fallen-out cohort Subramanian Swamy.

The MDMA has also been entrusted with the job of what to do next in regard to Karunanidhi and the Centre has been forced to take such a step "in view of the serious observations by the Commission in its interim re-

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port and the misgivings expressed by it in its final report."

Now while fixing Surbamanian Swamy, a long-time BJP baiter does make eminent sense, the other Swami is at the receiving end less because he is anti-BJP but merely by way of being seen to leave no stone unturned to unearth the truth.

Karunanidhi's is a different case altogether. Nothing might come out of interrogating him, but including him in the net could at least placate Jaya who has been cribbing that the BJP has been going soft on the DMK. In fact former CBI director Vijay Kiran has revealed in his memoirs that once when he and the Special Investigation Team chief D.R.Karthikeyan called on Jayalalitha when she was the Chief Minister and her first query was, "When are you going to arrest Karunanidhi?" The duo had responded by asking whether she had any incriminating material against him in her possession. She could not produce any, Kiran says.

Thus all through she has been trying to fix him and the Jain report has come as a boon for her in her war against the dmk chief. The BJP is only furthering her personal agenda in order to keep their government in tact, it is pointed out.

To cite some instances, the Action Taken Report (ATR), tabled along with the Commission's findings, has conveniently scooped out a couple of sentences in the final report - "Sri Karunanidhi was also not interrogated. On many matters his interrogation was quite relevant." - and clubs them with an observation in the interim report to the effect that he had extended tacit support to the LTTE and seeks to nail Karunanidhi suggesting his interrogation now. And it does not take into account the fact the final report has mentioned in the same breath five others too, Chandrashekhar, T.N.Seshan, Subramanian Swamy, Jayalalitha and Narasimha Rao, have not been interrogated. Why should MK alone be singled out now?

Besides the Commission has refused to read any sinister meaning into the last minute cancellation of a proposed DMK meeting at Sriperumbudur on the fateful May 21 and the allegations to the effect that Karunanidhi's son Stalin had asked his cadres to stay indoors on that day in anticipation of some incidents have been dismissed as baseless and unsubstantiated. It was at the instance of the ministers of the AIADMK and its allies that the BJP had decided on including Karunanidhi in the list of those to be proceeded against, observers in New Delhi assert.

But having succumbed to the pressures from its allies, the BJP then sought to wriggle out of it all by saying that no immediate action against the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister was being contemplated, certainly no dismissal. It was for the MDMA to decide on the matter.

Karunanidhi reacted angrily, dubbing the ATR as a political conspiracy, drawn up to humour Jaya while the latter demanded that a First Information Report be registered against him and that he step down in order to facilitate an impartial investigation.

Subramnaim Swamy does not know where to hide himself, but goes about ranting that the entire ATR is RSS-inspired and that it is out to fix him because he is trying to put together an alternative democratic set up at the centre.

The Cong-I under Sonia Gandhi seems to be caught in two minds. At the time of writing this article, all that the party decided was to reject the ATR, dubbing it politically motivated and saying that the MDMA probe contemplated was not sufficient. Beyond that it would not commit itself. Contrary to expectations it kept quiet on the issue of the demand for the dismissal of the DMK government and action against Karunanidhi. It is apparently wary that if it does train its guns on the DMK, the left parties who have come out openly in its support would turn hostile and so its plans of forming an alternative government in the near future could run into difficulties.

And it was the very same Congress, though led by Mr.Sitaram Kesri then but reportedly at the behest of Sonia operating from behind the scene, which had toppled the United Front government for the latter's refusal to disassociate itself from the DMK. Jayalalitha should be mightily disappointed by the wishy-washy approach of Sonia. She had expected her to take a very strident stand, after all it is an issue affecting her personally, and using that occasion to make peace with the new Congress President whom she had denounced as a foreigner with vaulting ambitions.

Jaya's associates had actually been going around saying that the tabling of the final report of the Jain Commission could prove a turning point, Jaya and Sonia would join hands, the BJP government would be toppled, a new formation put in place at New Delhi and Karunanidhi would go soon thereafter. For the moment such calculations have turned out to be a pipe-dream.

Interestingly Justice Jain does a neat somersault over his earlier indictment, though unwitting, of the entire Tamil community. He had said in his interim report, "The assassination of Shri Rajiv Gandhi would not have been possible the way it has materialised without the deep nexus of the LTTE operatives with the Tamils in Tamil Nadu..." That raised a lot of hackles in the state. Now he says, "The expression...was never and could never have been intended to mean that such nexus was with all Tamil-speaking people in Tamil Nadu. All the Tamils in Tamil Nadu may not even be in the know of the activities and operations of the LTTE... The expression was never intended to include all the Tamil-speaking population. Support for Tamil cause is different from having deep nexus with the LTTE operatives in the materialisation of the assassination. By no stretch of imagination such a meaning or sense can be given to the expression as has been given to it." That is some atonement.

At the end of the day what purpose has Jain achieved and what new revelation he has come up with? One government has been brought down, paving the way for the ushering in of a blatantly communal and retrograde government and now the DMK government, popularly elected, is sought to be destabilised apart from the fact that the Congress is seeking to make use of it to win back popular support.

To recall what this correspondent had written while commenting on the interim report, "One really shudders to think what more unsubstantiated and loonier conclusions he would arrive at given his proclivity to treat most solemnly even the most ridiculous piece of trivia as yet another startling piece of evidence against the evil forces which or who had conspired

(continued on next page)

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LANKAN TAMIL REFUGEES IN TAMIL NADU

Dr V Satkunanayagam

Since the 1983 racial riots and the flare up of the ethnic war, thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils have fled Sri Lanka and are living in various countries as migrants or as refugees. They are still continuing to leave Sri Lanka to escape from trauma of the ethnic war. Of these Tamils, over 150,000 are at present in Tamil Nadu. Earlier between 1988 and 1989 25,000 Tamil refugees and a further 54,000 between 1992 and 1994 had been repatriated on a programme organised by the Indian Government and UNHCR.

It is estimated that about 80,000 refugees are living on their own without any assistance from the Indian Government. Some of them are existing on the savings they had brought with them and support from friends and relatives abroad. Some are gainfully employed.

About 72,000 of the refugees are living in camps provided by the Indian Government. These Tamils are from the poorest class and have no one abroad to help them. They did not have the means to get to India otherwise but to undertake in desperation the hazardous crossing in small boats from the North and East of the Island to India. Many have lost their lives in the crossing. Most of them arrive in Dhanushkodi, the nearest point to Sri Lanka. The Indian officials interview them in Rameshwaram and then detain them in the large Mandapam camp which houses nearly 7,000 refugees. From there they are later distributed to the 132 camps spread throughout Tamil Nadu. The size of the camps varies from 125 to 3,000 residents. There is a police post in each camp.

India is not a party to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees. The Tamil refugees have no social or political rights in India and they are not subject to any International scrutiny.

In 1984 the refugees (along with some Indian professionals) formed a non-political, self-help organisation to provide relief to themselves. It is called the Organisation for Belam Refugee Rehabilitation (OFERR). It is concerned with health, nutritional, educational, employment and recreational needs of the refugees as well as with improving their living conditions. It is a registered charity and is supported by various International Non-Governmental Organisations, charitable institutions, the British Council and expatriate Tamils. OFERR has also received assistance from the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister's Refugee Fund. OFERR is also assisted in its work by the Jesuit Refugee Services, Tamil Nadu Voluntary Health Services and other Indian NGO's. A yearly external evaluation of the work and finances of OFERR is carried out by a team on behalf of the donors consortium. The accounts and other records are also subject to inspection by the Registrar of Societies, Tamil Nadu and Union Home Ministry.

OFERR has its Head Office in Chennai and branch offices in Trichi, Nellai and Erode. Dr Arul Gopalan, a Tamil Nadu writer is the President. Among the 435 very devoted staff, to mention a few names, are Chandrahasan, son of the late Thanthai SJV. Chelvanayagam; Sooriakumari Sinnathamby, Dr Shanthi Rajasunderan, Dr Veeravagu Shanmuganathan, Sam Kovitpillai and Rasiah Manikavasagar.

OFERR has a sister organisation - ProTEG - Organisation for Protection of Tamils of Eelam from Genocide and other violations of Human Rights. It's mandate is to promote the observance of International Humanitarian Instruments. It has campaigned on behalf of the 1,600 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees held in special camps or sub-jails accused of involvement in militancy but held without charge. In 1995 following representation made by ProTEG to the Human Rights Commission, all, but 140 of these refugees have been released.

In the 1980's there was widespread sympathy and support in Tamil Nadu for the refugees. This changed radically after the assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991. However the Tamil Nadu Government that came into power in 1996 is considerate and sympathetic towards the refugees.

Services by OFERR

The living conditions in the camps are poor, over-crowded and il-ventilated. The majority of refugees live in shanties. These structures are usually 3m x 3m x 2.4m in height. Some of the walls are of corrugated tar sheets or of mud. Some are brick built. The roofing is of corrugated tar sheets. There is a door but no windows. It is unbearably hot inside during the summer and cold during the rainy season. Some refugees are housed in cyclone centres and godowns. These lack privacy, "rooms are partitioned off by hanging old sareers, versties and gunny bags. A few live in vacated or donated houses.

The common toilet facilities are unusable in some camps and people go out into the open to relieve themselves. Water supply is mainly from deep bore wells fitted with hand pumps. Few camps have pipe-borne water as most of the camps are in remote areas. All camps have electricity and are provided with a TV each by the Government.

The camp residents have formed various welfare committees and OFERR provides financial assistance

(Continued from page 25)

to take away the life of the very dear Rajiv..." (See Tamil Times, Dec.1997). Mercifully though the storm of criticism he had invited earlier has apparently sobered him and he has been much more restrained this time.

The verdict in the Rajiv trial sentencing all the 26 accused to death has already been criticised as sweeping and as being based on flimsy evidence. The Jain Commission too has wound up with a whimper. Though there seems to be enough evidence gathered by the Special Investigating Team and placed before the criminal trial to nail the vengeful Tamil Tigers, the larger issues of the conspiracy as to whether LTTE was only acting as an executioner, and if it was so, who were the parties - Indian or foreign - behind that conspiracy. All these and other related questions remain unanswered. Perhaps the answers have been buried with Sivarasan and company. For the present, Jains and MDMAs notwithstanding, the proposition of a larger conspiracy to murder Rajiv involving individuals and agencies remains to be established. ●

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to them to improve the living conditions:- repair of houses and toilets; construction of common multipurpose huts; building of places of worship; purchase of indoor games and outdoor sports equipment, etc. Nurseries are run in all the camps.

The refugees receive a monthly dole from the Indian government which amounts to Rs480 for a family with 2 children of which Rs2O is contributed by the Tamil Nadu Government. This family of 4 can purchase weekly 11 kilos of rice at the subsidised price of 57 paisa for a kilo (Prices in the open market are Rs8-11 for a kilo). Sugar, wheat and kerosine can be bought at controlled prices. It is calculated that for the provision of the minimal calorie requirement for a family of 4, Rs2,000 per month is required. OFERR provides a nutritional supplement to children up to the age of 5 and pregnant and lactating mothers. These supplements are available to convalescing patients and aged residents. Farex is supplied to babies (561 babies were born in 1997). Vitamins, calcium and iron tablets are also provided.

Health conditions in the camps are fragile with the prevalence of communicable diseases such as TB, Typhoid and diarrhoea. OFERR provides medical assistance by conducting clinics which supply medicines and by running a clinical laboratory service. Financial assistance is provided to patients undergoing treatment in hospitals.

Camps in remote areas are far from medical facilities. To meet healthcare needs OFERR has since 1993 been selecting from the camps' residents suitable candidates and training them as Healthcare workers. Some doctors from the Medical Institute of Tamils notably Dr Karunyan Arulanandam from the USA, have been involved in this training and in providing medical care to the refugees.

There are at present 143 Healthcare workers attached to the camps. The aim is to have one Healthcare worker for every 500 refugees (64 trained Healthcare workers have returned to Sri Lanka). Healthcare workers visit the houses and identify healthcare needs, provide simple medication and arrange for the provision of medical treatment and aftercare. They facilitate antenatal care and child health and are involved in health education of camp residents.

Counselling helpers have been trained in courses designed and conducted by the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary. They provide counselling in the prevention of suicide, family break-up and deviant behaviour and are involved in programmes to relieve stress and trauma and to motivate the refugees.

There are over 22,000 children of school-going age among the refugees. Most of the children attend the schools along with Tamil Nadu children. There are now only 3 schools situated within the camps. A quarter of these children drop out of school between 10-13 years to find work or perform childcare at home when patients are out at work (this is so of Tamil Nadu children). OFERR provides assistance with primary and secondary education, supply of notebooks, textbooks, admission fees, coaching classes in English and other subjects. Places for University education have been secured, 20 for Medicine, 20 for Engineering, 10 for Agriculture and 20 Polytechnic places. In 1997, 90 students entered higher education of which 3 were for Medicine and 7 for Engineering. Cost per student including hostel fees varies between Rs6,000 to Rs18,000 per annum.

OFERR arranges a variety of vocational training:- tailoring and sewing, gem (artificial) cutting, carpentry and masonry, poultry training, typing and computing. English teacher and nursery teacher training are provided.

Many camp residents supplement their income in various ways. Some earn by doing semi-skilled work in the vicinity of the camps. There are tailoring units in the regional centres and in some camps. Assistance is provided to widows to start petty shops, bakeries, poultry and rabbit units, mat-making, etc.

There is widespread prevalence of indebtedness to money lenders both inside and outside the camps with interest as high as 120%. This situation is due to many factors - inadequate dole, irregularity of work outside, sudden illness, weddings, funerals, etc. OFERR has had meetings with State officials regarding plans to develop saving strategies.

These refugees are waiting for the day when there will be peace in Sri Lanka and they could return to their homes. In the meantime we, expatriate Sri Lankan Tamils living in other countries who are more fortunate and better off can help our poor brethren in Tamil Nadu. Like all Tamils the refugees value the education of their children. Sponsorship for higher education would be gratefully welcomed. Professionals-doctors,nurses,midwives, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, sports teachers, teachers of crafts, etc can visit Tamil Nadu and directly serve the refugees and train volunteers in basic skills to provide serices.

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BOOK REVIEW

IDEOLOGY, CASTE, CLASS AND GENDER

By Selvy Thiruchandran

266 pages, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, PVT Ltd., 1997

Review by Sasanka Perera,
Department of Sociology, University of Colombo

Introduction:

Influential but conservative anthropologists such as Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox have consistently argued that gender roles have essentially been produced as a result of human evolutionary history (Tiger and Fox 1971). What this means is that phenomena closely associated with human evolution would limit humanity's options for change as opposed to those phenomena based on cultural constructs. Anything culturally constructed is relatively more flexible and thus perhaps easier to change. That is, according to the above perspective many of the gender roles in contemporary human society cannot be changed since such roles are genetically coded and have evolved over millions of years of human history.

On the other hand, many other observers such as Dubisch have pointed out that arguments for biological determinism tend to favour male dominance and social arrangements advantageous to men (Dubisch 1986: 6). Yet others have argued that biological concepts devised to differentiate male and female sexuality are themselves culturally constructed. Such arguments also suggest that humanity's preference for biological determinism is perhaps due to the "assumption that male and female are predominantly natural objects rather than predominantly cultural constructions (Ortner and Whitehead 1981, quoted in Dubisch 1986). Thiruchandran's analysis which closely looks at the social construction of gender roles or what Gagnon and Simon (1973) call "sexual scripts" (quoted in Laws & Schwartz 1977) has to be generally located within the parameters of the debates and concerns I have just briefly outlined.

Outline of Parts One to Three:

Thiruchandran's book is an exhaustive account and analysis of the imposition of patriarchal gender ideological positions on the women of Tamil Nadu. In her analysis Thiruchandran takes into account the relatively long term and continuing processes of such impositions. Moreover, her analysis also takes note of caste and class distinctions in Tamil Nadu society in the analysis of gender issues. In her own words, Thiruchandran argues in the preface of her book, "women, despite caste and class differences that exist among them at individual levels, can be identified as also subjected to subordination by common culturally defined and culturally enforced patterns of restrictions." (xi). She further explains that "these restrictions are reinforced and transmitted by a common ideology (xi). Ideology, and its role in formulating and legitimising the gender status of women in Tamil Nadu is in fact one of the main themes in the book.

According to the author the research was launched to investigate two aspects of social life of women where ideology plays a significant role. According to Thiruchandran's formulation these two aspects are: (1) the daily life patterns of women; and (2) major trends and themes in Tamil films. In the discussion of ideology she uses a Gramcian theoretical perspective. In fact, throughout much of the book a preoccupation with a theoretical approach clearly influenced by the ideas of Antonio Gramci, coupled with a consistent feminist interest in and concern with the subject matter and the analysis is clearly visible.

The book consists of 14 chapters in four separate parts. In part one, Thiruchandran presents her theoretical formulations for analysis, and describes the methodology used for information collection. She uses extensive interviews conducted across caste and class divisions instead of conventional anthropological fieldwork techniques which more often than not would restrict a researcher to a single village and perhaps even to a single caste or other such division. Therefore her interview material offers us a wide spectrum of experience. In part two titled " The Construction of Gender Hierarchy in the Tamil Social Formation." Thiruchandran is concerned with the historical evolution of gender hierarchy in Tamil society. Through a detailed historical analysis of Tamil society in South India Thiruchandran argues that; the patriarchal hegemony in the social construction of gender roles and the discrimination of women on that basis in Tamil Nadu is nothing new. In fact, she demonstrates that such discriminations have existed over a long period of time and have continued to exist mostly as a result of the continuing hegemony imposed by Brahmanic values on Tamil society. At one point in the preface of her book she makes the point that despite the socio-cultural similarities between Tamils in Tamil Nadu and Jaffna, the kind of gender discrimination obvious in Tamil Nadu did not take place in Jaffna to the same extent perhaps due to the absence of Brahmanic dominance.

Looking closely at the evolution of South Indian social history Thiruchandran attempts to place in context the dynamics that played a part in ascribing a sense of what she calls : otherness" to women. In her analysis she closely looks at concepts such as chastity and its association with practices such as widow seclusion. In addition, she also investigates the social constructions of such apparently contradictory dualisms as mother/whore and goddess/witch in the gendered perception of female sexuality.

In part three entitled "Gender and its Ideological Significations Across Caste and Class" Thiruchandran discusses in four chapters how gender issues and related ideological positions differ and merge within and between different caste and class formations such as Brahmin women, women in what she terms middle range castes and Adi Dravida women. Despite the differences within and between caste and class divisions in the perception of gender roles, I think she makes a strong case to argue that irrespective of such divisions there is a pervasive sense of what one may call gender discrimination or gender suffering among many of the women she has talked to. The existence or perception of such a sense at one

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level however, does not mean that gender scripts impact upon women uniformly across caste and class lines. For instance, Thiruchandran demonstrates the pervasive existence of restrictive Brahmanical caste duties and the adherence to such values even by women who are non-Brahmin. On the other hand rich upper caste women, particularly if they are professionals may be able to avoid some of these restrictions in the long run which most poor women would not be able to do.

Outline of Part Three:

The discussions in these three parts of the book finally leads to the fourth and final section of the book entitled "Women in the Celluloid Image, Ideological Reconstruction and Representation." This section consists of five chapters. What is presented here is an extensive discussion dealing with the manner in which women are represented in Tamil films, and how through such images persisting patriarchal positions and myths as well as discriminatory gender practices against women are reinforced and reconstructed. In a society such as Tamil Nadu the role the medium of film plays in social change cannot be under emphasised. In the context of such a vast film industry and a large film-going population within which exists a pantheon of male movie heroes some times much more influential than the Hindu pantheon itself, the influence the medium exerts on the general populace for whatever purpose must be immense.

American sociologist, Russel Middleton in his influential paper, "Ethnic Prejudice and Susceptibility to Persuasion" (1960) argued nearly 37 years ago that films can be used to combat ethnic prejudice. Much earlier, during World War Two Hitler's film-makers made powerful movies to inculcate strong feelings of ant-Semitism among ordinary Germans. On the other hand, we also know that in Tamil Nadu itself former Chief Minister M G Ramachandran's political base was primarily created through the medium of films where he played the roles of both human hero and god. Therefore the influence of the medium in the construction of images, values and prejudices cannot be under emphasised.

In the analysis of films Thiruchandran engages in an exercise of semiotic interpretation and has borrowed some central ideas from the Frankfurt School. Many of those who belonged to the Frankfurt School have demonstrated the utility and power of the media (164). Thiruchandran begins with a detailed discussion of the history and the politics of the Tamil film industry in Tamil Nadu. Then she proceeds to analyse 18 specific films individually and to ascertain the kind of messages and ideals transmitted through this medium. She demonstrates that some of the central themes that keep on repeating themselves in cinema have continued from the time of the Furanas (166). She also demonstrates how movies continue to produce and reproduce such enduring dualisms as that of the virgin and whore and the good woman adhering to Dharmic principles and the bad one who does not.

In addition to the analysis of the messages, values and prejudices transmitted through the movies Thiruchandran also attempts to place in context and gauge the extent of influence of the movies by interviewing a group of women who have seen these specific films. Drawing such direct correlations between movies and the nature of their influence however, is methodologically and conceptually quite a difficult task to achieve which Thiruchandran herself observes at one point. The problem is that the images, biases and other messages that are transmitted and reproduced through films also exist in multiple forms in the outer society. Therefore whether some of these influences came to the women through movies or through other kinds of socialisation is difficult to establish. It seems to me that Thiruchandran's analysis of movies alone would have made the point even without the benefit of the interviews, since the possibilities of such influence is immense in the specificities of Tamil Nadu socio-cultural context.

Nevertheless, some of the responses of the women to the movies themselves indicate another dimension, perhaps of the future of gender hierarchy in Tamil Nadu. Despite the serious encroachment of Brahmanic values and the reproduction of restrictive gendered practices through a variety of social institutions including the movies, some women were quite critical of their overall position as well as what they saw in the movies. Without overstating the fact, such responses seem to suggest that the kind of messages that are transmitted through movies are not always uncritically and inherently internalised by these women. Perhaps there is no harm in being hopeful about a future of improved gender relations in Tamil Nadu. When that future would be is a more difficult thing to imagine.

Conclusion:

In conclusion then, I would suggest that the major contribution of this book is its analysis of the role of ideology in creating gender roles and its impact on the routine lives of women and how these patriarchal gender biases and restrictive scripts for female sexuality are reproduced in the movies. Moreover, in a context typified by Sri Lanka's current intellectual climate where there is no or very little distinction between pamphleteering and scholarship, which is clearly visible in feminist literature as well, Thiruchandran's contribution is an example of serious scholarship by a Sri Lankan feminist.

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Readers Forum

HARASSMENT & BRIBERY

I am a naturalised British citizen. I went to Sri-Lanka for the first time in 3 years to visit my sick mother, who is in her 70's. The Sri-Lankan police at the airport harassed and robbed my father and myself.

I arrived at Colombo Katunayake international airport at 3.00 am on Monday 4 May 1998 from London by an Air Lanka flight. My father met me at the airport and when we were waiting for our van, a policeman approached us. My father believed he was a sub-inspector. He started threatening my father that he had information from the CID that I was suspected of having links with the Tigers, meaning the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). However, the policeman did not have any details about me nor did he show any interest in checking my papers. The policeman grilled my father for about 5 minutes and told us to follow him to the police station to make inquiries about me. My father explained to him I lived in England and that I was coming to Sri-Lanka for the first time since I left Sri-Lanka 13 years ago and that I was only there a week to see my sick mother.

My father suspected that the policeman was harassing us only to get some money from us but neither my father nor I wanted to give them any money because we had not committed any crime apart from being Tamil.

We were directed to driver of our vehicle to drive us to the nearest police station. On the way the sub- inspector again approached, this time on a motorbike with a constable, told our driver to stop the van, and called my father to go behind some nearby trees to be interviewed. His colleague parked his motorbike several metres in front of our van at such an angle that I could not see the number plate. All the time he was standing with his back to us so we would not see his nameplate - they seemed very experienced in that job.

Again the sub-inspector told my father that he had information from the CID that I was suspected and this time he told my father to drop me at the police station and go home, and that they would send me to my parents' home once they had finished their inquiries. That was totally unacceptable to my father as it was common knowledge that many persons who had been taken away by the police and the military had gone missing and never found again. My father pleaded with him and asserted that I had no link with the LTTE and was only visiting Sri Lanka to see my mother.

After 15-20 minutes the sub- inspector sent my father to take me behind the trees and asked me three or four questions. He spoke to me very slowly. First he asked me what was the name of my village in Jaffna. Then he asked me whether I could speak Sinhala; then he asked what I had got in my luggage. I showed him my British passport without his asking for it. I was born in Batticaloa in the east part of Sri Lanka while my father was working there. The sub-inspector took that to be suspicious, but my father explained to him why I was born in Batticaloa. Then the sub-inspector told me to go back to my van. He continually threatened my father for another 15-20 minutes. Finally, my father agreed to give him 500 rupees which he had on him. The sub-inspector sent my father to fetch me with my hand luggage. When I went to him he demanded to know how many dollars I had on me. I told him I had only £10 on me (I really had only £10) but he did not believe me. The sub-inspector took the £10 and wanted more money. He must have presumed that as I had come from London, I must have had a lot of money on me. I let him take the money because I was very tired after the long journey from London and anxious to get away from this ordeal to meet my mother after 13 years. My father explained that I was unemployed but the greedy policeman still asked me to give him more money, then he took the 500 rupees from my father and let us go. So, he got £10 from me and 500 rupees from my father. All the money we had on us that time.

We have not got the sub-inspector's name or number but I can give a description of him. He is middle aged, about 5'8" in height, fat and pot-bellied. His colleague was standing well away from us all the time but I can say that he was young with a slim build. The incident took place between 3.30 am and 4.30 am.

My father later told me that if we had not given him the money, with the wide range of powers they had, the police could have taken me into custody and put me into the police cells where they would have beaten me to sign a blank paper upon which they could have put whatever they wanted. The police could hold anyone in the police cell for two weeks without any charges. After two weeks you would be taken before a magistrate who could adjourn the case for a month, during which time you would be kept in custody. When such a case finally comes to court, it collapses because of lack of evidence. Another possibility was that the sub-inspector knew that I was there for only one week which provided a stronger lever on me.

While I was in Sri-Lanka I spoke to several people about what happened to me. I understand that what happened to me also happened to many innocent Tamils, and a lot of them lost a lot of money in the same way. In one case the police took not only the money but also the victim's luggage and beat him up as well. I also understand the police take innocent Tamils into cells and release them when the family pays them the money. The police have a wide range of powers under emergency laws and police abuse is also very widespread.

I would also like to mention that one of my cousins now lives in Colombo. When he was living in Jaffna in January 1997, the army took him to a military camp where they kept him for 10 days. While the military held him there, they tortured him. He was hung upside down and severely beat him up; they threatened to burn him. They did not tell his family where he was being held or even whether he was alive or dead. After 10 days the army brought him to his family and got his mother to sign a letter saying he had not been beaten up and that he was well looked after while the army held him.

I have written to both the Sri-Lankan High Commission and the British Home Office regarding this matter and am waiting to hear from them.

S Yogakumar
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MATRIMONIAL

Jaffna Hindu parents *in Chennai, South India seek grooms for attractive graduate daughters, ages 29, 24, computer operators. Send horoscope, details. M 1038 c/o Tamil Times.*

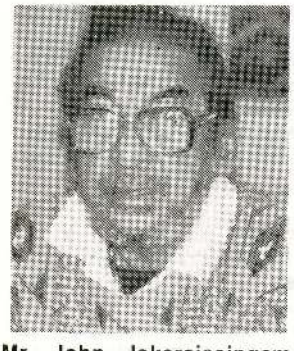
Jaffna uncle *seeks professional bride for nephew, 29, M. Sc., (Computer Engineering), B.Eng (Electrical & Electronic Engineering), working as Software Development Engineer in UK. Reply with horoscope, details. M 1039 c/o Tamil Times.*

Jaffna Hindu professional family *seeks professional bride with good East/West mix and willing to settle in U.S. for son, 29, M.Sc. from leading American university working in U.S. Please reply in confidence with all details. M 1040 c/o Tamil Times.*

Jaffna Catholic *seeks bride for brother, 42, unmarried, British citizen, electronic engineer in permanent employment in UK. Send details M 1041 c/o Tamil Times.*

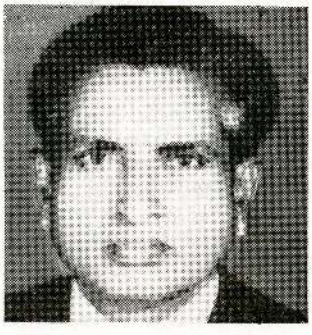
Jaffna Hindu parents *seek professionally qualified bride for graduate son, 26, CIMA finalist, MBA, London Company financial manager, UK citizen. Send horoscope, photo, details. M 1042 c/o Tamil Times.*

OBITUARIES



Mr. John Jekerajasingam Rasanayagam, *(73), formerly of Inland Revenue in London and Bletchley; beloved husband of the late Mrs. Malkanthi Helen (nee Kotalawela); loving father of Mrs. Devamanohari Pillai; grandfather of Anushka and Shimoni, father-in-law of Mr. Prabhu Pillai; brother of late Thuraisingam (ST), late Wilfred (Baba), Mrs. Mahes Chellappah, Chinna, Mrs. Viji Inparajasingam and Mrs. Malar Senthilnathan; brother-in-law of Mrs. Lakshmi Navaratnam and Mrs. Mira Amaresekara passed away on 5th August 1998 in Colombo and was cremated at Kanatte.*

IN MEMORIAM



Mr. Mayilvaganam Velummayilum *J.P., U.M., Attorney-at-Law and former Chairman, Urban Council, Point Pedro, Sri Lanka passed away on 31.8.98 and the ninth anniversary of his demise falls on 31.8.98.*

Sadly missed and fondly remembered by his loving wife; children Thayanandarajah (UK), Nithianandarajah (New Zealand), Mayilvaganarajah (UK), Chitra (Colombo), Anandarajah, Krishnarajah and Jayanthi (all of Madras); grandsons Cameron, Ewan and Atharson; son-in-law Kamaleswaran (Colombo); daughter-in-law Sumitra (UK), Devi (New Zealand), relatives, friends and a host of grateful contituents. - 59 Edgwarebury Gardens, Edgware, Middx., HA8 8LL.

In loving memory of **Mr. Apputhurai Gunaratnam** *of Point Pedro, Sri Lanka formerly Divisional Superintendent of Post Offices, Sri Lanka on the eighth anniversary of his passing away on 28.8.90.*

Sadly missed and fondly remembered by his loving wife Rani; children Thirukumaran (Australia), Vasuki (Sri Lanka), Devaki (Australia), Sutharsan (UK), and Saratha Devi (Australia); daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, grandchildren, sister and in-laws. - 67B St. Anns Road, London N15 6NJ. Tel: 0181 802 5601.

IN MEMORIAM

Second Death Anniversary of
Mr. Selvarajah Kiritharan
Engineer, London, who passed away on 22nd August 1996.

Your life was so simple,
You were courageous and bold,
Your deeds of Prominence and fame
Could never remain untold.
You left us so sudden,
Your memories never forgotten.

Affectionately remembered by your ever loving father, mother, sisters, brother, grandmother, uncles, aunties, in-laws, nephews and nieces.

Mr. & Mrs. Selvarajah, 28, Bridge Water Road, Alperton, Wembley, Middx. Tel: 0181 903 1851.

IN MEMORIAM

In Loving Memory of Mrs. Kamalavathy Gnanasoorian *(Alaveddy) of Colombo and later of London, UK on the first anniversary of her passing away on 16th June 1997.*

Through Times Past, Present and Future, Amma, memories of your love shall endure. Your affectionate ways are for ever written in our hearts.

Remembered with love and affection and deeply missed by husband Gnanasoorian, son Jeyaraj, daughters Jeyahini, Shivajini; sons-in-law Harindran, Gunasekaram; grandchildren Sanjiv, Aneesha, Archanna; aunt, uncle, brothers, sisters and all their families. - 72 King Edward Road, London E17.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Sep. 1 *Aavani Moolam.*

Sep. 2 *Ekathasi.*

Sep. 3 *Pirathosam; Feast of St. Gregory.*

Sep. 5 *Full Moon; South London Tamil Welfare Group (SLTWG) Women's Front meet. Tel: 0181 545 3313.*

Sep. 6 *5.30pm Tamil Orphans Trust presents Grand Musical Concert by P. Unnikrishnan - Indian National Award Winner - at Brent Town Hall Forty Lane, Wembley, Middx. Tel: 0181 908 1101/482 7745/422 3943; Feast of Our Lady of Aiythiyamalai, Batticaloa.*

Sep. 6 *2.00pm Feast of Our*

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Continued from page 31

Lady of Madhu, organised by Association of Sri Lankan Catholics (UK) at St. Michael and St. Martins Catholic Church, 94 Bath Road, Hounslow, Middx. Tel: 0181 979 8955/426 4565.

Sep. 8 *Feast of the Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary.*

Sep. 9 *Sankadakaa Chathurthi.*

Sep. 11. *Karthigai.*

Sep. 12 *Krishna Jayanthi; SLTWG Drop In. Tel: 0181 545 3313.*

Sep. 13 *Avani Sunday (4).*

Sep. 16 *Krishna Ekathasi; Feast of St. Cornelius.*

Sep. 17 *Pirathosam.*

Sep. 19 *Purattashi Sani (1).*

Sep. 20 *Amavasai.*

Sep. 21 *Navarathiri Festival First day; Feast of St. Martin.*

Sep. 24 Chathurthi; Luxmy pooja.

Sep. 26 *6.00pm Jaffna College Alumni (UK) Annual Re-Union at Chiswick Town Hall, Heathfield Terrace, London W4. Tel: 0181 949 4234 (President)/01795 425 574 (Secretary).*

Sep. 26 *Purattashi Sani (2); Shashdi.*

Sep. 29 *Saraswathy Pooja; SLTWG Navarathiri celebrations. Tel: 0181 545 3313.*

Sep. 30 *Vijayadhasami; Vidthyarambam; Manamboo; Feast of St Jerome.*

At Bhawan Centre, 4A Castletown Road, London W14 9HQ. Tel: 0171 381 3086/4608.

Sep. 19 *7.30pm Karnatic Flute by Sikkil Sisters.*

Sep. 21 *6.30pm Lecture by Prof. Yogi Ramaiah on 'Kriya Yoga'. All Welcome.*

Sep. 26 *6.30pm Carnatic Veena by K. Subramaniam.*

AUSTRALIAN NEWSLETTER

Concert by Bombay Sisters: *The 'Abayakaram' organisation presented a vocal recital by Smts Saroja and Lalitha popularly known as the Bombay Sisters on 13th June 98 at the Sir John Clancy Auditorium of the University of New South Wales. Since the Bombay Sisters have been the stars in the carnatic music scene in India for a long time, the auditorium was packed with 'Rasikas'. The accompanists Sri Raghvendra Rao - Violin and Sri Ganesh - Mridangam were also from Tamilnadu. Dr. A. Balasubramaniam, President of 'Abayakaram' welcomed the audience and pointed out that all the expenses incurred in organising the concert had been borne by anonymous donors and every dollar from the ticket sales would be donated in equal amounts to the Sri Venkateswara and Murugan temples in Sydney. He also announced that the total collection was 12000 dollars and thanked the Bombay Sisters, the accompanists and the audience.*

Bharata Natya Arangetram: *Another Bharata Natya Arangetram burst on the Sydney dance scene with the difference that the dancer was a teenage boy, Selvan Seran Sribalan. The Arangetram took place at the Science Theatre of the University of New South Wales on 25th July 98.*

Fifteen year old Seran is a student at Homebush Boys' High School in Sydney and had been learning Bharata Natyam from Guru Smt Damayanthi Balaraj followed by a short training under the Dananjayans of Madras. It was a great day for the proud Guru. Seran stunned the audience with his superb footwork and excellent abhinaya. Sydney audiences who have only seen dances by young girls were extremely appreciative. Almost every item and especially the Varnam in Lathangi Ragam drew tumultuous applause.

Nattuvangam was by Seran';s Guru Smt Damayanthi Balaraju, the vocalist was Smt Mathini Sriskandarajah, who delighted the audience with her melodious singing. She had come all the way from London for the occasion. So did the Mridangist Nathamani Muthu Sivarajah. The other accompanists were Sri Kopathidas Narayanadas - Violin, Selvi Vathani Varatharajan - Veena and Sri Ganeshan Ghajan - Ghatam. The compering in Tamil was by Selvi Rathika Sivagnanasundaram and in English by Sri Gnanakaran.

Apart from the Varnam, a highlight of his performance was the interpretation of 'Dhasa Avatharam' (the ten avatharams of Lord Vishnu). At the end of the performance Seran received a standing ovation from the audience.

There were several guest speakers including the Principal of Homebush Boys' High School, Mr. Brian Greene. The Chief Guest, Mr. Sriskandarajah, also from London, in his keynote speech while complimenting Seran, hoped that future performances of this nature would include items depicting the present trials and tribulations of our Tamil brethren back at home in our motherland.

Father Emmanuel in Australia

Prof. Dr. S.J. Emmanuel, Vicar-General of the Diocese of Jaffna (1992-97) and a former Dean of Sri Lanka's National Seminary was in Australia in July 1998. A witness to the historic exodus from Jaffna in October 95, Dr. Emmanuel is an outspoken critic of Sri Lanka's 'War for Peace'. He addressed a packed public meeting in Sydney on 26th July 98, organised by the Australian Federation of Tamil Associations and was presented by Mr. Ana Pararajasingam of the association. He has written extensively and has met human rights activists in his attempt to tell the world of the horrific war being conducted behind 'closed doors'. He has met Bishop Desmond Tutu, made submissions to the UN Commission for Human Rights in Geneva, addressed Pax Christi International, been interviewed by the 'Internationalist' a monthly magazine focusing on Third World issues, and met several human rights organisations in the course of his campaign. He is the author of a book titled 'Let my People Go', which is a collection of his speeches and writings.

Veena Arangetram at Bhavan

Sugi *(Rachel) and* **Sutha** *(Rebecca) gave a full length Veena recital at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan on 5th July 1998. It was their Arangetram day under the guidance of their Guru Smt Sivasakthi Sivanesan. Sugi and Sutha, both twins at birth are the daughters of Mr. & Mrs. Rajendran of Raynes Park, London SW20. They are preparing for their G.C.S.E. at the Sutton High School.*

Their performance started with the Sarasijanabha - Varnam followed by Vathapi, Himagri thanaye and Swami Thiyagaraja's Sadinchene. The choice of songs apparently by the Guru suited the sisters well and they were able to build up a tempo leading to the Ragam Tanam Pallavi in Lathangi Ragam and Tisra triputa Thala.

The lighter pieces towards the end Inuvil Veeramani Iyer's Kalpaha Valli, Meera Bajan and Bharathi's Chinnan Chiru Kiliye were very popular pieces loved by all and were handled well by Sugi and Sutha.

The parents released an excellent souvenir printed locally. Among the many colourful photos were messages from the Guru, Dr. John Marr, Ram Cumarasamy, Ann Courts (Headmistress of Sutton High School), Veena Professor K.P. Sivanandam, Rajkumar Bharathi, Bhavan's Executive Director Dr. Nandakumara, Veena prodigy Kalaimamani E. Gayathri and Wimal Sockanathan.

The Sisters were accompanied on the Miruthangam by Bhavan's Balachandar and on the Gadam by R.N. Prakash. Pretty Yasothara Gnananandha, senior Veena and Vocal student of Smt Sivasakthi and an engineering graduate from Imperial University sat between the sisters gracefully and provided the Thambura accompaniment.

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Ramila's Samarpanam

The Wimbledon Shree Ghanapathy Temple was the venue of a unique occasion on 11th July 1998. It was an achievement every musician would aim for after a long period of training. The violin samarpanam of Chelvi Ramila Rabindra, daughter of Mr. Rabindra and Dr. (Mrs.) Rabindra was one such occasion. Both the parents and the Guru Srimathi Rudrani Balakrishnan have upheld the age-old tradition in presenting Ramila's samarpanam to Lord Ganesh.

Ramila gave a very satisfying recital on the violin. She was accompanied on the mridhangam by Sri Muthu Sivarajah, on the ghatam by Sri Gananathan and on the muharsing by Sri Sithamparanathan. Smt Anandarani Balendra compered the evening's proceedings. The musical pieces she played were brought out well with perfect rhythm and ease.

The samarpanam concluded well with a well presented vote of thanks by Ramila's sister Brinta Rabindra.

S.P.

Asian Mafia

Asian Mafia *is SAMUDRA's third venture into the experimental expression of Indian Music. Classical singer* **Rajkumar Bharati,** *on a return trip to the UK, surprises us all with his spirit of adventure and daringly shares the stage - and songs - with Black American singer* **Sharon Rose.** *Sharon has worked with artistes of the calibre of Jools Holland, Elton John and Tom Jones.*

K.S. Bhavani Shanker, *Music Director of Samudra, is the instigator of this seemingly impossible combination of vocal styles. His keen artistic vision alerted him to the enormous potential of bridging the gap between classical Indian music and Western popular music.*

Asian Mafia's exceptionally strong percussion forms an intriguing subplot. Three very different talents come together with wicked intent. **Bavani Shanker** *on Mridangam,* **Talwin Singh** *on Tabla and no other than* **A. Sivamani** *on drum kit.*

A special highlight is brilliant young saxophonist **Mangalore K. Anandaram** *on his first visit to the UK. The ensemble of eight also features* **Shan Varma** *on keyboard and* **Neville Malcolm** *on bass guitar.*

Sept. 19 *Phoenix Art, Leicester. Tel: 0116 255 4854.*
Sept. 29 *QEH, South Bank. Tel: 0171 960 4242.*
Oct. 3 *Bluecoat Arts Centre, Liverpool. Tel: 0151 709 5297.*
Oct. 10 *UMIST Underground, Manchester. Tel: 0161 200 3286/3275.*
Oct. 18 *The Bull, Barnet. Tel: 0181 449 0048.*

Bharata Nartaki Padma

In the midst of ritualistic Arangetrams performed in and around London by students of various sorts, it was quite adventurous on the part of Sankara Fine Arts to have invited the scholastic, research oriented, Bharata Nritya artiste Padma Subramanyam of Madras, to perform her own version of Bharata Natyam at the prestigious Queen Elizabeth Hall in South Bank. Padma, daughter of the legendary 'Director' Subramanyam, had learned to dance under the expert guidance of Vazhuvur Ramiahpillai, and began teaching the art while she was in her teens. During her forty years or so in her artistic career, Padma had been evolving the art to its original format through her Doctorate thesis on Karanas based on the original Natya Sastra of Bharata. Thus she became a celebrity.

Padma's performance at Elizabeth Hall on 4th July is an experience that one could dream of: the great expanse of the auditorium, variant steps and body movements, appropriate thala variations and abhinaya sequences, all contributed to the classic art of this scholar. Besides some known pieces taken for exhibition, Padma boldly and successfully used the overture of Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet to illustrate the Ramayana story of Jatayu Moksham. It was a tremendous performance which proved Padma's creativity and understanding of the art. To sustain her artistic capability and research orientation even in her fifties is something to be admired.

Sivapatha Sundaram.

Sri Lankan Physician from USA Honoured in London

The following information was inadvertently omitted from the account that appeared under the above heading in last month's issue. The error is regretted.

'Dr. Indrakrishnan previously held a position as a clinical assistant professor of Medicine in the Division of Gastroenterology at the University of Virginia. He is a 1985 graduate from the faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo and an old boy of Royal College, Colombo, Sri Lanka.'

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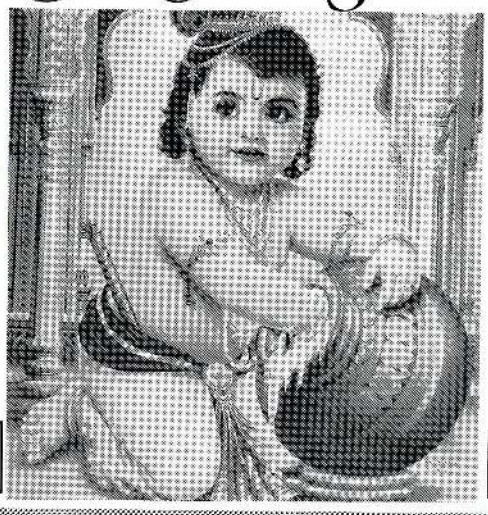

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